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### THE EMBODIMENT OF MEANING AND THE MEANING OF EMBODIMENT: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS IN THE STUDY OF POSTURAL PRACTICE

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#### Abstract

Drawing on the example of *kuṣṭī-pahalvānī* (traditional wrestling in India) to engage with arguments presented in each of the chapters that have come before, this “Afterword” engages with the problem of how meaning is assigned to physical practices and to the body engaged in various forms of self-development and self-discipline. An analytical perspective based on semiotic theory is used to examine the problem of embodied meaning as well as methodological questions about how to compare various forms of physical practice. Emphasis is placed on the contingency of meaning and on the social construction of knowledge, as the social construction of knowledge provides a framework for understanding the intellectual significance of both transcendental consciousness and physical fitness.

#### KEYWORDS

*Kuṣṭī-pahalvānī*, Semiotics, Subtle Body, Self, Religion.

## Introduction

Debates and arguments concerning what counts and what does not count as yoga will undoubtedly animate scholarship long into the future, no matter how narrowly or how broadly the concept is defined (see Birch 2013; Foxen 2017; Jain 2014, 2015; Singleton 2010). In this chapter I seek to untangle some of the ways in which yoga has come to be understood as a discrete form of physical practice and to develop thereby several theoretical arguments concerning the problem of the body and self-realisation in relation to society at large and the social context of practice. I do this by analysing and interpreting the way in which *kuṣṭī-pahāvānī* (“wrestling” in India) as practised in *akhārās* (traditional “gymnasiums”) can be conceptualised as a form of Sāṃkhya yoga, and also by reflecting on a number of key insights raised by authors who have contributed essays to this volume.

No matter how it is used, the word yoga invokes a history of ideas anchored in philosophical and metaphysical speculation and suggests the possibility of a complete transformation in perception and consciousness; transformation that is, in some sense, profoundly embodied (see Eliade 1970; Mallinson and Singleton 2017; Singleton and Byrne 2008; Whicher 1998; White 2011, 2012). In terms that some fully embrace, others reject out of hand, and still others strategically or unconsciously profit from in various ways, the idea of yoga is animated by the powerful impress of embodied soteriological possibility (see Singleton and Goldberg 2014).

Most scholars will agree that yoga is not “religious” in any meaningful sense, even if there are ways in which sacralised beliefs articulate with moral and ethical concerns, ascetic self-discipline, and world renunciation in various forms of practice. On one level the problematic relationship among philosophies of yoga and ritualised forms of sacralised practice highlights the now well understood problem with religion as a distinctively modern category of thought that distorts the reality of experiences that exist, both in space and in time, apart from the discursive frame of the European enlightenment (Asad 1983).

In ways that raise interesting theoretical questions concerning the conceptualisation of yoga in contemporary practice, the soteriological possibility of self-transformation, and the possibility of the complete dissolution of the self through yoga, should probably be understood as an articulation of cultural essentialism akin to the fetishisation of supernatural beliefs in a range of historical contexts. In a profoundly problematic sense, yoga fetishises the self in the context of society by means of the very methods of practice designed to transcend consciousness of the self within the rubric of

soteriological possibility (see Burley 2004; Sharma 2011). God, and faith in god, are to the modernity of religion what the Self, and the transcendence of self, are to the modernity of yoga.

On this question, Sarbacker's insights on *sūryanamaskār* are directly relevant and help to frame a number of other issues taken up by him and contributors to this volume concerning the way in which embodied forms of practice signify cultural meaning unto themselves, and how these meanings can be interpreted, misinterpreted, and strategically reinterpreted on registers that extend beyond the body-as-sign to published texts and public discourses. A critical history of *sūryanamaskār* is instructive precisely because it crosscuts religious discourses of propitiation, ritualised practices that correlate with devotional prostration, and embodied forms of self-development. Although many forms of physical practice discussed in this volume have metaphysical attributes and yoga invokes soteriology, *sūryanamaskār* betrays a history of practice that, in some sense, engages with the internalisation of sacralised devotion and obeisance rather than with the transformation of the body on either purely subtle and transcendent self-transformation, or on gross, secular and athletic plains of experience. In terms of semiotics, the practice of *sūryanamaskār* signifies religion, and an established relationship to divinity, even if practice is considered physical fitness. As Sarbacker points out, the incorporation of *sūryanamaskār* into the domain of modern yoga adds the insult of political posturing and confusion to the injury of mixed metaphysical metaphors.

Dualisms complicate fetishisation, contributing to the confounding way in which embodied faith in god is impervious to the logic of reason, and how religious ritual becomes a materialised performance with multiple, contextualised interpretations of meaning. Fetishisation also provides a framework for critiques of dualism. This is especially true of the arch Cartesian dualism of modernity, but also of dualisms manifest in the structure of other ontologies (see Mallinson 2014; Nicholson 2007). The intricately embodied aspects of practice that people associate with yoga provide a richly textured framework within which to explore the theoretical implications of fetishisation on both these plains.

In this regard *yama* ("rules of conduct") and *niyama* ("rules for self-purification") are especially *apropos* since they articulate specific ways in which social, moral, ethical and physiological practices overlap and intersect in the practice of yoga, and how they relate to gross and subtle aspects of embodied experience. In conjunction with this, it is important and interesting to note that principles that are articulated within the rubric of *yama* and *niyama* in the context of yoga find modified but equally complex and

delineated integration into forms of embodied practice that involve regulated self-discipline, including sex, athletics, dance, dramatic performances, gymnastics and various martial arts. Practitioners of *kuṣṭī-pahlvānī* who explicitly claim that wrestling is a form of yoga explain their thinking in terms of subtle, culturally coded physical practices associated with celibacy, non-violence (which is not the same as passivity), truthfulness and the development of moral character, even more so than in terms of the practice of *prāṇāyāma* (Atreya 1965, 1993). The gross contrast between *āsana* and grappling is regarded as a somewhat superficial point of distinction between the two, relative to both the subtle body unto itself, and the significance of a powerful body in society at large (Atreya 1973c).

Understanding physical practice in relation to *yama* and *niyama* can lead in many interesting directions, but especially to the question of the relationship between the meaning of embodied experience and the directional orientation—*internal* towards consciousness and perception or *external* towards society and the world—of self-development and self-realisation. Arguably, *niyama* principles of self-purification entail an integrated, internalisation of the more explicitly social ethics of behaviour articulated as *yama* admonitions against stealing, lying, acquisitiveness, sex/sensuality, and violence. As we will see in the discussion to follow, a broad perspective on physical practice highlights a fundamental tension in the significance of the embodied self in relation to its soteriological possibility and the cultural meaning of transcendence.

### The Problem of the Body

As we learn more about the pre-modern history of physical practices articulated within the rubric of yoga, it is important to note how conceptualisations of the body within this rubric intersect with other forms of self-discipline. The body, variously conceived, is both a means to the end of something that is not bound by our sense of physicality, as well as a manifestation of materiality that must be transcended. In a word, the body and embodied experience produce a number of paradoxes and logical challenges in terms of how those experiences get represented, how they get translated into public knowledge, and what they mean once they take on discursive meaning apart from, but in anticipation of, the experience of transcendence.

Most of my work has focused on yoga (2004, 2008a, 2012, 2018) wrestling (1992, 2013a, 2020a), and forms of medicine in the 20th century (2005, 2008b, 2015, 2018), with an emphasis on the cultural construction of experience (see 2011, 2020b) rather than on the continuity of historical traditions across time. Of primary interest to me are discourses about the nature of power—physical and metaphysical; natural and

supernatural—and modes and means of practice that instantiate these discourses in bodies. I argue that the body is culturally constructed, but that our perception of the body, our living, experiential consciousness, defines the limit of its possibility. The idea that a body can transcend itself is the product of an elaborate, fetishised, utopian discourse, hedged against equally fabulous claims made by others based on specialised techniques and ineffable knowledge.

As such, physical practice is very deceptive. It appears to be a means to the end of great power in and of itself, whereas the body only signifies things we imagine to be more powerful than we can possibly experience. Ultimately, the body, including everything in our consciousness, and the traces of this that we leave to memory and file away in archives, is a material substance fixed in space and time (see Arnau 2013; Sharma 2011). Our sense of the body produces illusions that are real in our experience of them. But this does not mean that we, like other animals in the world, are not still subject to laws of nature that must be understood as fundamentally real from a “transcendent” standpoint beyond our imagination and our human self-perception.

Now, before I get crucified for resurrecting Descartes—to mix very corporeal metaphors!—the point I want to highlight is more semiotic than metaphysical, and more basic to physical practice than is the problem of duality and binary reason in the context of modernity.

Experience based on perception is the function of social reality rather than an idealistic function of mind over matter, to put it crudely and somewhat simplistically. Taking a very, very *longue durée*, self-awareness and consciousness, as characteristic of our species, derive from biosemiosis (Sebeok 2001; Favareau 2010). We are a *social* animal defined by the *social* consequences of verbal and non-verbal communication. Only as a derivative consequence of this are we a unique species endowed with culture as a distinctively human attribute. We do not think ourselves into being, we are beings with consciousness as a consequence of our awareness of the significance—in the full, semiotic sense of the term—the *significance* of our collective being.

Language and culture are epiphenomenal forms of communication that articulate consciousness as a function of relationships mediated through signs and the elements of signs in a social and ecological environment. To argue that consciousness is a function of the mind is an anthropocentric conceit of the Enlightenment. It is a conceit because humanism entails the appropriation of the power assigned to god, within a bracket of consciousness impelled toward fetishisation and the apotheosis of social reality into animated, material forms of the supernatural. Embodied human experience

is, in essence, based on deep fetishisation. The power of fetishisation derives from a misperception of reality produced by culture; the illusion that the integrity of consciousness is embodied and can be enhanced through various modes of refined embodiment. Embodiment is, in point of fact, a function of social, ecological and cosmic relationships mediated through signs; signs that cross the spectrum of these domains in the sense that our senses are tuned to the significance of both human and non-human things, in and around our bodies, including the sun, the moon, and the stars among other features of the universe.

Now, before I give the impression of having lapsed into an enstatic state of transcendental consciousness (god forbid!), one point should be made clear. I am not arguing for the reality of enlightenment or some other form of transcendent power in embodied experience, or even that we should understand the meaning of enlightenment as an articulation of discrete cultural logic. The history of physical practice oriented toward transcendence and transubstantiation should be understood in terms of a critical sociology of knowledge in the same way that a history of religion cuts through beliefs and ritual practices to articulate the elementary forms of social reality. A critical sociology of knowledge is oriented towards an understanding of the relations that constitute this reality and not, I think, towards an understanding of embodied experience as conceptualised in the mind. Precisely because the body can seem to stand for itself as an iconic, independent, timeless sign of our being, it is important to enumerate its contingency, theorising the relationship among different forms of physiological practice, but keeping foremost in mind the ontology of semiotics as against the continuities or discontinuities of culture that lionise our humanity by purporting to overcome the limits of our species being by transcending our perception of the embodied self.

## Entanglements

Whatever else they may be, postural yoga and *kuṣṭī-pahalvānī* are both forms of physical practice that are grossly embodied and grossly fetishised. On one level they are categorically different, one from the other, and yet to conceptualise them as categorically different is to follow the logic of culture to try and discover the meaning of power in the nature of embodied experience.

My earlier work on *kuṣṭī-pahalvānī* has been in this mode, with a focus on *brahmacarya* and the way in which celibacy can be understood as the lynch pin of a way of life centred on the embodiment of *śakti* (Alter 1992). In essence—and that is meant figuratively and literally—celibacy as a form of practice produces power that is both

physical and metaphysical (Atreya 1973a, 1973b, 1987a, 1987b). But we must not lose sight of the fact that celibacy is always, first and foremost, a conceptual category born of language and biology, the “bastard” child of sex itself, as sex and sexuality are relational, social, and semiotic through and through. The social semiotics of sex-in-essence extends, not coincidentally, outward from the body, entangling physical practices in other discursive forms of power such as gender, religion, nationalism and health.

Like sex and all forms of intensely embodied experience, *kuṣṭī-pahalvānī* and yoga are defined by the fundamental paradox of semiotics. Meaning is mediated through signs that appear to not be signs at all but rather the material essence of incarnated meaning. In one manifestation the paradox is reflected in the way in which sex, *kuṣṭī-pahalvānī*, and yoga idealise something which cannot quite be articulated—orgasms that transcend pleasure, power that transcends strength and stamina, consciousness that transcends self-consciousness—by endlessly enumerating and delineating categories and sub-categories of experience. The illusion of being able to transcend the limits of language through embodied experience is thus reproduced endlessly in the same form that maintains the illusion.

Baker’s analysis of the Magic Wheel in Tibetan yoga provides a striking illustration. The metaphorical meaning of a *cakra* in this context broadly provides an intellectual perspective on embodied transformation that recognises the illusory nature of sensory experience, but affixes the illusion to the axle of language—so to speak—in order to produce insights that are efficacious and liberating. Whereas the Wheel of Life turns around the axis of misapprehension, the Wheel of Truth signifies a delineated method of praxis, revolving around the hub of moral discipline, by means of which to move along a path toward liberation. In light of the evocative power of the words *cakra* and *’khor lo* in Sanskrit and Tibetan respectively, and the exchange and cycles of interpretation and re-interpretation that trans-Himalayan communication suggest, the designation Tsalung Trulkor is particularly suggestive precisely because, as Baker puts it, indexing the functional and mechanical attributes of materialised *yantra* as geometric signs, the Magic Wheel turns on the axis of consciousness as “a transformative methodology for actualising a posited metaphysical substrate of mind and physiology while freeing consciousness from habitual self-referential awareness” (p. 443). From a semiotic perspective there is an interesting way in which embodied practice—the internalisation of metaphorical meaning—is incorporated by means of the interplay of words and graphic design as externalised memory that can be internalised.

Here Silvestri's analysis of *vāyttāris* in *kaḷarippayarru* highlights a slightly different way to understand how embodied language as a specific manifestation of semiosis struggles to connect experience, meaning and the perfection of practice through delineation and elaboration. She points out that *vāyttāris* are "vocal cues that aid the internalisation of movement" (p. 342) in the practice of *kaḷarippayarru*. While they are cues articulated by a teacher giving instruction, the student internalises these cues as sounds that convey meaning apart from the linguistic significance of sounds as words, sounds that come together as cadence, and sounds that are eurythmically internalised in practice. Silvestri draws our attention not to the singular significance of sound, rhythm, and the distinction between a syllable and a word, but to the fact that *vāyttāris* become meaningful because they are inherently interstitial on all levels of semiosis, and take on practical significance in relation to progressive development rather than as stipulations of achievement. As she points out, "my interpretation is that the efficacy of the *vāyttāris* depends on their particular status in between the rhythmic syllables and the verbal instructions, so that they are perceived as being the one or the other according to the practitioners' progress" (p. 342).

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the cultural links between dance and martial arts, Ganser's analysis of physical practices in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and the *Abhinavabhāratī*, raises similar questions to both those discussed by Silvestri and by Constantini about the meaning of postures and movements in *kaḷarippayarru*. Ganser draws our attention to the way in which physical practices that codify performance bring an appreciation for subtle aesthetics together with an appreciation for the powerful invocation of embodied mood. In the conjunction of dance as ritual and dance as an artistic performance that combines movement, mood, and richly textured mythopoesis, we can appreciate the mimetic relationship between an internalised metaphysical conception of power on the one hand and the empowering experience of physical practice on the other.

In light of this, Ganser draws attention to the significance of *piṇḍibandhas*, a striking example of a concept that reflects both the impress of *imitatio dei*, as she points out, but also a logic of enumeration, as articulated explicitly in the dualism of Sāṃkhya, whereby the nature of the human body and the nature of god are part and parcel of congruent conscious experience—and a congruent experience of consciousness—that is at once illusive and illusory. The mimetic aspect of *piṇḍibandhas* reflects in microcosm, and in terms of a theological language used to articulate the power of ritualised movement, something comparable to *samādhi* as an enstatic state of self-transcendence in which the body no longer is subject to change. Practitioners of *kuṣṭī-pahālvānī* who speak of their bodies animated by the power of *śakti* are similarly trying to articulate an



elusive point of connection between meaning and supra-natural experience as realised through the intensity of practice.

In general terms, people tend to confuse collective consciousness as a state of perpetual interpretation in social contexts with the possibility of refined, reflexive, embodied self-consciousness as a state of absolute being. The paradox is manifest in the problem of the body, and the way in which the body in all its various dimensions—gross and subtle alike—suffers the entelechy of transformation, manipulation, and the illusive possibility of transubstantiation.

Most generally there are three broad overarching conceptual problems that relate to physical practices oriented toward metaphysical experience. 1) What constitutes the “self” of disciplines that focus on self-development? Here the problem is understanding the philosophical relationship between self and Self—*ātman* and *Ātman*, *puruṣa* and *Puruṣa*—relative to projects of “individualised” self-development that are distinctively modern. At least in part this question highlights the problem of and with language, the way in which language entails translation, and the way in which translation—which is a form of social communication—entails indeterminacy. 2) What constitutes “the body” if it is at once tangible and intangible, subtle and gross as well as biological, ecological and cosmological within a semiotic framework of relational dynamics? 3) Apart from dualist and non-dualist philosophical stipulations, how does a holistic non-binary mind/body conceptualisation of experience relate to the logic of physical practices?

These conceptual problems directly bear on several theoretical and methodological issues, which may also be stated as questions.

Firstly, given the terms, broad multivocality, how does one define yoga? We know it is a word that has such broad significance that it can become almost meaningless. And yet—or perhaps because of this—it is an incredibly powerful word that is intimately linked to the body. If yoga is what Claude Levi-Strauss referred to as an empty signifier, all the more so in the variable contexts of modern practice, how does one distinguish between what is and is not yoga, either in the past or the present? For those seeking enlightenment this may not matter. Or, more properly, the realisation that it does not matter is what fundamentally matters, the emptiness of *kaivalya* being the ultimate end, regardless of the means of empty signification!

But to produce knowledge that helps us understand the history of ideas related to physical practice, it is important to know what is and is not yoga as a term that is used, self-consciously in context, to conceptualise the body. The same holds true for other key concepts such *pahāvānī*. In other words, we must try to understand histories of

knowledge that give meaning to designations such as *yoga* and *pahalvānī* as they are used in context, doing so with equal doses of categorical scepticism concerning the possibility of generalised enlightenment and the truth of relativism concerning forms of physical practice.

Here Powell's analysis is especially insightful and interesting since he draws our attention to sculptural representations of postural practice, inviting us to engage with the question of how to interpret the meaning of bodies depicted doing things that look like gymnastics, dance, *haṭhayoga*, *vyāyāma* routines, and/or acrobatics, and to struggle with the problem of what these terms mean and why we use them to describe representations of bodies doing things that signify a broad range of possibilities. Powell's discussion takes us to the key point: all signifiers are meaningless when they are decontextualised, and empty signifiers generate layers of confusion—especially when they are written in stone—that can be manipulated in one way or another. His focus on representations highlights the way in which everything that is meaningful about the body has to do with its contextualised significance in time and space, but also that careful attention to the details of contextualisation can, as illustrated in particular by Ganser, Constantini, Silvestri and McCartney, show that this form of academic exercise is not about building walls and brackets around delimited domains of knowledge and practice; it is about problematising relationships between meaningful things.

Rochard and Bast invite us to compare the physical practices of the Turko-Persian *zurkhāneh* and the *akhārās* of southern Asia between the 13th and the 17th centuries CE. This is an interesting exercise for several reasons, one being the obvious question of the flow of ideas across this landscape and the shared meaning, purpose and method of practice anchored in the designation *pahalvān*. Quite apart from the way in which Rochard's analysis sheds light on the history of specific techniques, and despite the fact that the language used to talk about yoga in the pre-modern period does not appear to have been used explicitly in this context, it is clear that a comparative analysis of the relationship between corporeality and power within the institutionalised framework of gymnasiums draws attention to philosophical questions concerning physical self-development.

On one level Rochard's analysis invites us to recognise what is obvious, that wrestling is wrestling, regardless of the context. Yet he challenges us to think about how institutionalised wrestling in late pre-modern West Asia incorporates elements of shamanic ritual and Sufi mysticism in ways that can be helpful in thinking about how wrestling traditions in southern Asia are similarly complex and nuanced rather than

simply pugilistic. Broadening the perspective to include the ancient Mediterranean world brings this point forcefully home, given the importance of the gymnasium and the practice of wrestling in the Greek lyceum to the self-development of Athenian citizens grappling with the materiality of the soul (see Alter 2013b).

Apart from a number of fascinating and suggestive details concerning the possible convergence of Buddhist and Islamic ideals in the conceptualisation of power in the *zurkhāneh*—and broader questions which link philology to physiology and physical fitness—Rochard and Bast make a very important, general point about the social significance of body discipline: the concern of *pahlavān*'s with their status as a community in the hierarchy of Persian society and the concern of the *jyeṣṭhī-mallas* with their status as Brahmins engaged in martial forms of self-development. Here it is important to remember that, at least in the case of the *jyeṣṭhī-mallas*, writing a text to document a claim to a certain kind of power and prestige effectively transforms the meaning of physical practice as codified in a martial art. What weapons, and training in the use of weapons, signifies on one register—that of the body—changes in the context of a different semiotic register: the *Mallapurāṇa*, a text that is about a claim to power in relation to the social perquisites of purity, rather than about power as a function of strength, skill, and stamina in the blood, earth and sweat of the gymnasium. But, here again, as the two scholars points out, and the example of *yama* and *niyama* in the context of *kuṣṭī-pahlavānī* makes clear, forms of embodied practice that link purity to physical strength-to-strength of character and ultimately each of these to other ethical and moral concerns, semiotically connect physical practices and discourses of power through a manipulation of language; language that is textured and complex rather than two-dimensional and binary with regard to purity and pollution, strength and weakness, *kṣatriya* and Brahman.

Rochard's attention to the details of both physiology and philology, a point reflected in each of the contributions to this volume, is important to recognise and highlight. Parsing distinctions is critically important in untangling the logic of purposeful borrowing from both the cultural continuity of local creativity and from the serendipity of deceptive, superficial appearances.

McCartney's analysis of the history of postural practice and gymnastics using polls of various sizes and shapes, and using them in different ways for different purposes, is a case in point about the meaning of physical practices, and both the problem of terminology as well as more opaque but legitimate questions about how the symbolic significance of polls might shed light on meaning that transcends the literalism terminology. Suebsantiwongse adds an additional perspective based on his analysis of

the *Sāmrājyalakṣmīpīṭhikā* text and the incorporation of polls and gymnastics in performances intended for royal amusement on *Navarātri*, highlighting the Tantric significance of ritual activities.

Both McCartney and Suebsantiwongse focus on the way in which the performative features of doing yoga on poles, practising wrestling moves on poles, and climbing and doing tricks on poles, takes on different kinds of significance in different contexts. Ultimately, their attention to the precise details of contextual meaning helps us appreciate the complexities of distinctions that make each iteration of practice that much more significant, both unto itself as well and more generally through comparative contrast with other iterations. In different but comparable ways McCartney and Suebsantiwongse provide critical, correctively analytic perspectives on generalised claims that feed into explicitly politicised and popularised arguments about the continuity of traditions over time, where everything about polls, yoga, gymnastics, wrestling and postural practice supports the claim of advocates for the Indian national sport of *mallkhamb*.

An interesting point raised by these two essays is the problem of interpretation that draws on generalised symbolic meaning. When a *mallakhāmba* is like a *mallastambha*, which invokes the idea of a *Śiva-stambha*—which suggests large-scale manifestations of *liṅgams* in the iconography of the Mahā Yogī himself—is it legitimate to say that *mallkhamb* performances involve the mythopoetic significance of erotic asceticism? Certainly a strong case can be made. But, again, context, and the deepening construction of contextual elaboration, makes almost all the difference. Here Suebsantiwongse’s interpretation is especially important in that one might conclude that tricks—especially magic tricks—performed on a poll are only intended to have meaning as a form of royal amusement, and that they have nothing to do with sex or sexual symbolism... until it is realised that the performance takes place in the context of a ritual celebration infused with Tantric significance, and the point of performing “impossible” feats on a poll signifies the power of illusion and the various means by which that illusion can be transcended. What makes this interesting is the suggestive, inconclusive, but richly textured logics of correlation and meta-correlation that open across and between semiotic plains of consciousness that connect bodies to polls and polls to bodies.

With respect to physical disciplines, the problem of the body unto itself is particularly knotty, since what one does to and with one’s body can stand as a gross signifier independent from the subtle meaning one may want to assign to a posture, procedure, or exercise. This is the problem of “confusing” *daṇḍ*s (jackknife “pushups”) within the

rubric of *kuṣṭī-pahalvānī* with *āsana* within the rubric of *vinyāsa*. The performance of one can appear to be identical to the other, but both their conceptualisation and significance can be quite different.

Here Armstrong's analysis of the history of *vyāyāma* in the 19th century is most directly *apropos*. As he points out, *vyāyāma* is a term that means physical exercise in contexts that range from gymnasiums dedicated to the development of fitness and strength to exercise as a feature of Ayurvedic healthcare management. Based on his close reading of several key 19th-century texts, it appears that physical fitness as a form of modern European self-development was combined with literature and forms of practice that reflect historical traditions from pre-modern South Asia. This convergence shaped an understanding of modern Indian *vyāyāma* that has had a profound impact on the physical practices associated with yoga, as these crystallised globally starting in the early 20th century.

An important insight to be gained from understanding the history of *vyāyāma* as a conceptualisation of how the body can be developed is that it sheds light on both the inadvertent confusion of *danḍ*s, *vinyāsa* dynamics that look like *danḍ*s, and *āsana* that look like postures (such as *adhomukh śvānāsana*, that might merge with other postures, such as *bhujāṅgāsana*, to constitute *danḍ*-like physical exercises) and, as is just as likely, the purposeful combination of postural forms of *haṭhayoga* practice, pre-modern South Asian exercise techniques and European forms of physical exercise that can be called modern Indian *vyāyāma*. Here the devil of meaning coded to different aspects of embodied experience must be recognised in the details of language use in context.

Constantini highlights a comparable issue regarding the question of how to understand the delineated categories of *cuvāṭ*, *nila*, *nīkkaṃ* in the *kaḷarippayaṛṛu* tradition of the northern Keralan school. When does the correct placement of the feet as *cuvāṭ* become a stance as signified by the term *nila*? Furthermore, if a stance is congruent with a posture that is signified by terminology that draws on the lexicon of *āsana*, how does that blur distinctions that are relevant to the articulation of yoga in relation to a martial art that suggests all-to-easy translation across these conceptual domains? Here it is also worth noting that the location of stance within a sequence of movement can also significantly change the implicit meaning of how stance is conceptualised. In the context of *cuvāṭ*, *nila*, *nīkkaṃ*, the term *nila* appears to signify a shift from latent, energised stability to a stance that anticipates release in powerful movement.

In *kuṣṭī-pahalvānī* the term *pantra* signifies stance in a way that is congruent with *nila*, but is conceptualised as a point of stable, energised balance between the application of

offensive moves and defensive countermoves. It reflects the power of immobility as a counterpoint to the power of movement, as movement engages paired bodies in a relationship that entails the risk of being knocked off balance. On the plane of gross correlation there is congruity between a stance and a stance, a posture and stance, and the position of one's feet that establish a stance, but the devil of subtle distinction is not only in the details, but in the conceptual categories that frame and define the experience of practitioners.

Quite apart from the relationship among *āsana* postures, *kaḷarippayaru* and *kuṣṭī-pahāvānī*, the “emptiness” of yoga as signifier, in combination with the deceptive literalism of the body's materiality, makes it possible for some to claim that *namāz* performed in a mosque is “simply” yoga by any other name. And this, to say the least, has political implications!

In his discussion of how *daoyin* self-cultivation practices in 7th-century CE East Asia reflect influences from South Asia, Steavu provides rich documentary evidence for the borrowing of ideas. But he also engages with the problem of who can attribute what sort of power to bodies engaged in parallel modes of self-cultivation. In many ways the politics of knowledge in the 7th century CE was probably as fraught as in the case of 21st-century *namāz*-yoga, but Sun Simiao's Taoist references to Brahmanic breathing and massage reflect an additional problem: the fetishisation of knowledge that is powerful and insightful precisely because it is arcanelly alien and seductively evocative of the possibility that what practitioners in East Asia have been trying to achieve—but have never succeeded in realising (at least to their complete satisfaction)—might actually be possible. In other words, the problem of meaning associated with physical practices is compounded and complicated by the fetishisation of secret knowledge about what might be possible but has never been experienced. The seductive possibility of discovering truth by searching for knowledge in distant lands is a trope at the heart of Orientalism, regardless of the fact that in the case outlined by Steavu it is a journey of discovery to the south-west, and then back again, rather than a search for secret knowledge in the Far East. This geography of relativised knowledge—which is ultimately about physical practices that centre on breathing—maps out on the gross body in curious ways that highlight the deep contingency of self-cultivation and the perpetually dislocated possibility of transcendental self-realisation (see Alter 2009).

Yang examines the question of the flow of ideas across wide expanses of space and time that have influenced the practice and textual representation of *haṭhayoga*, *yangsheng* and *daoyin*, and the role that *neidan* possibly played in the development, communication, and translation of ideas in the development of knowledge that

connected East to South Asia between the 3rd and 11th centuries CE. In a related but more focused mode of analysis Birch and Hargreaves trace out the probable adaptation of pre-modern ascetic forms of self-mortification to the development of early modern *haṭhayoga* postural practices, and the translation—both at the level of language and embodiment—of pre-colonial *tapasyā*-inspired *āsana* for the development and codification of modern postural yoga by Swami Sivananda in Rishikesh in the 1920s.

Not only does the fine-grained, multi-disciplinary scholarship on geographically bounded South Asian traditions shed important light on how one might understand the logic of the more expansive flow of ideas and practices analysed by Yang—wherein the distinction between nourishing life (*yangsheng*) and the self-disciplinary exercise of guiding and pulling (*daoyin*) can be seen as either very similar to or radically different from soteriological asceticism (*tapasyā*)—the philologically inclined, textual history of early modern influences that Birch and Hargreaves provide highlights an important point in the channelled flow of ideas and embodied signs that shaped physical practice in colonial India.

With a new understanding of how Sivananda drew inspiration for his codification of modern yoga from medieaval *haṭhayoga* texts that had been influenced by forms of earlier practice, which are best characterised as asceticism, it is very important to point out that Shanti Prakash Atreya, son of the Sanskrit scholar Bhikhan Lal Atreya, was reconceptualising *kuṣṭī-pahalvānī* in terms of Sāṃkhyan principles at his father's academic centre for the study of yoga psychosynthesis in Rajpur in the 1950s, not far from Rishikesh where Sivananda was based from the later 1920s until the early 1960s. Given Bhikhan Lal Atreya's work on the *Yoga-Vāsiṣṭha*, and Shanti Prakash Atreya's adaptation of his father's philosophical work to the development of intensive, yoga-inspired *phalavānī* "self-cultivation," it would be very interesting to understand better the possible exchange of ideas between Rajpur and Rishikesh in the 1930s, repositing in what might remain of Bhikhan Lal Atreya's home office archive in the village of Bandarjuddah—a place where words were subject to the alchemy of radical translation—to fully appreciate the dynamic exchange of ideas within a very localised geography of southern Asia at a critical time in the modern renaissance of yoga and, as Yang and Steavu point out, in Asia more broadly.

The problem of the empty signifier and semiotic meaning more broadly extends through the body to ecology and, in fact, into the domain of cosmology, given the relationship between air, ether, the apparent emptiness of space, and conceptualisations of that which is infinite. In its material multivocality and as a substance with powerful symbolic significance, air connects the body to the environment by means of

breath and breathing. *Prāṇāyāma* is, needless to say, conceptually very different from breathing as an autonomic, physiological reflex. *Prāṇāyāma* involves breathing as a mode of conscious physical practice that is said to transform air into *prāṇa*. Thus, it is an embodied articulation of consciousness that can be at once elemental and cosmic. What is particularly interesting about *prāṇāyāma* is that the experiential distinction between it and autonomic breathing is subtle self-awareness, whereas consciousness of breathing necessarily turns *prāṇāyāma* into an act of public communication with social significance. It becomes open to interpretation. The embodied practice of *prāṇāyāma* turns the body-engaged-in-regulated-breathing into a sign that signifies self-awareness as an ideal in the domain of public knowledge, where it becomes a different thing altogether from the desire for experience in the embodied mind of the practitioner.

The point here is that embodied practice produces and reproduces a binary distinction, even as exercise and self-discipline in its most subtle manifestation is oriented towards a transformation of consciousness that is intended to altogether transcend signification. The emptiness of the signifier is fundamental to the semiotics of *prāṇāyāma* unto itself. But the emptiness of the signifier makes it difficult to draw distinctions of meaning in the context of physical practices that involve breathing, and that may or may not entail the *logic* and logical entailments of *prāṇāyāma*. While this can produce profound confusion and misunderstanding, it makes it possible for us to examine very different modes of physical practice that involve breathing, and to analytically recognise subtle similarities that belie gross differences.

Constantini draws our attention to the importance of *vāyu* in the articulation of embodied power and prowess in the practice of the northern school of Kelaran *kaḷarippayarru*. As she points out, the term *vāyu* encodes subtle distinctions of meaning in relation to various conceptualisations of the body. What strikes me is the way in which *vāyu* in this context seems to signify many of the subtle attributes of *prāṇa*, and yet how it remains distinctive within the framework of the northern school of physical practice. On one level it could be argued that *vāyu* brings the more subtle attributes of *prāṇa* into a conceptual arena that is materialized in the practice of breathing. At the same time, a conceptualisation of internalised breathing that is similar to but different from *prāṇāyāma* means that *vāyu*'s significance derives from an open-ended distinction. This is a distinction between concepts that are ultimately almost identical within a framework that entails comparative correlation as against the impress of distinctiveness that characterises different schools, different forms of *kaḷarippayarru*, different kinds of physical practice, and, more broadly, different martial arts in which practitioners parse the meaning and embodied significance of breathing air.



Here a concrete example will be helpful. *Pahlvāns* engaged in *kuṣṭī* are often admonished to breathe only through their nose and to breathe into their abdomen rather than into their chest. To breathe in this way is thought to produce strength and stamina. It is conceptualised as a means to the end of embodied *śakti*, but also as a sign—mouth closed, abdomen inflating and deflating—that one’s body is animated by a kind of power that extends beyond the body. To gasp for air with an open mouth and a heaving chest, as some ethnographers are wont to do, signifies both gross exhaustion and a lack of concentration. It signifies a lack of conscious awareness of one’s body, but only within the rubric of a very narrow, circumscribed conceptualisation of awareness. The question, in relation to the three questions outlined above, is whether regulated breathing while engaged in the physical practice of *kuṣṭī-pahlvānī* is necessarily linked to the physical practice of *prāṇāyāma*.

So, the first theoretical problem is how to delimit the meaning of terms that signify physical practices. My argument is that we should be attentive to deep semiotics and be sceptical of the logic of culture which tends to construct artificial boundaries around the meaning of key concepts, such as *prāṇāyāma*, especially regarding rarefied forms of embodiment.

The second point I want to make is focused on the problem of the relationship between self-awareness as a manifestation of individualised, physical practice and collective consciousness as itself a form—perhaps the most elementary, social form—of physical practice. There is profound difference between a single person engaged in the physical practice of something narrowly referred to as yoga, and groups of people engaged collectively in exercise and self-discipline. From a sociological or anthropological perspective, the purposeful isolation of the self from society to achieve higher consciousness is very different from people engaged collectively in rituals that articulate embodied belief. It is difficult to overstate the significance of this point in highlighting how logics of physical self-development confront the limits of material reality, including the logic of world renunciation.

From the standpoint of physical discipline, it would be difficult to imagine a more “physical” form of practice than *kuṣṭī-pahlvānī*. Extreme exercise that builds muscle strength and intensive aerobic training that produces stamina and speed are paramount. But *kuṣṭī-pahlvānī* is also a form of practice defined by the structure of an *akhārā*. An *akhārā* is, fundamentally, a social space for self-discipline and the embodied realisation of philosophy, if we remember that philosophy is, in essence, a way of life that encompasses aesthetics, ethics, health, and the development of moral character

and wisdom, rather than the regimented, purely intellectual discipline it has become in the academy.

An *akhārā* is a social space comprising elements that are conceptualised in the literature on *kuṣṭī-pahalvānī* in terms of the five *mahābhūtas* enumerated in Sāṃkhya: earth, water, fire, air, and space (Atreya 1965, 1973b). The bodies of *pahalvāns* in this space, engaged in *kuṣṭī* and *vyāyāma*, similarly are said to derive from the evolutes of *prakṛti*. In this conceptualisation, *ojas* is the refined, most subtle articulation of *prakṛti*, as *ojas* is the condensed essence of semen (Alter 1992). *Ojas* is to semen what space is to air. Celibacy, as an exercise in self-control is cognate with the exercise of breath control. *Brahmacarya* and *prāṇāyāma* are conceptualised as analogous forms of elemental physical practice, especially considering that form of *prāṇāyāma* in which the breath is inhaled and held indefinitely.

If the *pahalvān*'s body reflects the cosmic, transcendent power of *ojas*, *ojas* is not taken to be an ethereal subtle element unto itself. It is the means to an end of moral and ethical self-development that produces not only physical strength in the arena of the gymnasium, but personal attributes such as virtue, strength of character, confidence, equanimity and equipoise. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, this is the biomoral nexus of *yama* and *niyama* in the logic of *kuṣṭī-pahalvānī*. Celibacy itself is transformed from a means to the end of meta-physical fitness based on the symbolic significance of *ojas* in the structure of Sāṃkhyan dualism—where it reflects *puruṣa*—to an end in itself as an attribute of identity and stoic *puruṣa* personhood; an embodied sign of powerful self-control as a social fact rather than a metaphysical ideal.

Alchemy defines a framework—at once metaphorical, mimetic, metaphysical and material—in which we can conceptualise both the *kuṭīr* of the adept yogi and the *akhārā* of the *pahalvān* as analogous. Both bodies are disciplined and transformed in terms of the dynamics of *prakṛti*. Both the *akhārā* and the *kuṭīr* are crucibles in which bodies are refined and transubstantiated (see White 1996). While this is true, self-discipline in the social context and ecological environment of an *akhārā* sets in motion a semiotics of self-awareness based on a cultural elaboration of the relationship between the body, elements, the environment, and society. This elaboration is public, performative, and profoundly grounded in the perfection of life in the world.

The body of the *pahalvān* is developed along a trajectory that is opposite to that of isolation, concentration, meditation and transcendence. In many ways, the logic of *kuṣṭī-pahalvānī* can be understood as a commentary on the contingency of *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma* in the context of a history of yoga and the goal of enlightenment. Although

control of semen is an integral feature of physical practice in both contexts, the fact that it is controlled by means that are very different in each, and the fact that the means to the end of controlling it produce bodies that symbolise different things in society at large, means that there is great academic value in understanding the relationship between how embodied power is conceptualised, but only an illusion of truth in trying to resolve the diversity of forms into an embodied experience of enlightenment itself. The intellectual value of this exercise—very well illustrated in the adept chapters of this inspired volume—is to appreciate the impress of a desire for embodied perfection, without becoming ensnared in the illusion of that as a singular possibility.

I hardly need to point out that there are *akhārās* and there are *akhārās*, and the social significance of ascetic *akhārās* and *sampradāyas* in pre-modern southern Asia is a topic of analysis unto itself. The term *akhārā* is, not coincidentally, a signifier as empty as the word *yoga*. There are critically important ways in which physical practices are embodied by ascetics who do what they do—*tapas*, *yoga*, *tantra*, military combat, magic tricks, healing rituals, and a whole spectrum of supposedly asocial or anti-social things—in the context of *akhārās* that are different from wrestling gymnasiums.

As I have argued in this chapter, it is deceptive to follow the logic of signs thinking either that the diversity of meaning means that nothing is really the same, or that diversity means that everything is ultimately, and in essence, the same. The physical practice of academic contemplation is to enjoy working out the essential truth of greater understanding that derives from the endless, and endlessly seductive, dynamics of semiosis, where an *akhārā* is and is not an *akhārā*; where *pahāvān* gurus are very heavy but not because gurus are heavy (see White 1984); where *liṅgams* are *liṅgams* but are also polls and not just *liṅgams* in either sense of the words, as things that relate to experience; where stances are stances but are also postures; where sounds are sounds that become syllables and words, and words can be articulated as subtle sounds that set the tone for gross, but beautiful, rhythmic movement; where *vyāyāma*'s past endlessly anticipates the future of *yoga*'s present; where sex is sex, but also the opposite of sex, and where the enumeration of coital possibility reveals a certain kind of truth in the exhaustion of infinite pleasure, and so forth.

## Conclusion

The physical practice of *yoga* has become popular and will remain so because of the fetishisation of the body in relation to the persistence of an ideal—one might think here

of the mystical sage lost to the world in the Himalaya—that is seductively mediated by ever more subtle arguments about what remains enigmatic, illusive, and ineffable.

There are, as we know, fundamental differences between the practice of yoga and the practice of religion, even though there are interesting ways in which yoga has been perceived, by various groups, to have religious or sectarian connotations. To the extent that there are important links between the practice of yoga and asceticism, one could argue, on a somewhat deeper level, that physical practices fit into a world view structured by the relationship between world renunciation on the one hand and ritual hierarchy in the mediation of divinity on the other. In many ways, Louis Dumont’s classic work essentialised the hierarchical structure of this relationship under the rubric of an encompassing, “religious” world view (1980).

What I would like to suggest, however, is that we think about the fetishisation of yoga in terms of a critical sociology of knowledge, as sociology, in all of its various theoretical and sub-disciplinary permutations—most certainly including anthropology—is anchored in a critique of the cultural logic that defines belief and the fetishisation of belief in sacralised things, human and non-human, pure and impure, worldly and other worldly. To be clear, I am not suggesting that the study of yoga can be advanced by arguments for either its cultural uniqueness or for its distinctiveness as a form of embodied self-discipline. It is more productive to engage seriously with the emptiness of its significance and ask ourselves what might be equivalent in the practice and conceptualisation of materialised yogic ideals to the elementary forms of religious life in the social history of our collective belief in supernatural power and the divinity of god. If god is the fetishisation of social relations, and yoga is not simply an articulation of religion, what underlies the fetishisation of *samādhi*? *Kuṣṭī-pahlavānī* directly engages with this question, which is why a comparative perspective on physical practice, such as advanced by the chapters in this volume, can be especially instructive.

Whatever the elementary form of yoga might be, it must be understood without using the internal logic of yoga itself, otherwise one is trapped in a snare of tautological reasoning and recursive fetishisation. This trap is the idea that enlightenment is the realisation of a truth that is transcendent, rather than an articulation of cultural meaning grounded in the reality of universal experience, and relations of interconnection and congruence that infinitely stem from a semiotic understanding of the body as a text that reflects social experience.

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