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THE FLUENCY OF ‘SELF’: CLASSICAL YOGA PHILOSOPHY AND PERFORMANCE IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

While Westerners think of yoga as the practice of physical postures, the inquiry of classical yogic philosophy is actually one of identity, particularly as outlined in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. In simplest terms, the integration of the physical and mental practices of yoga supports direct experience with “intrinsic Self,” an ultimate unchanging reality, which is differentiated from “transient self,” a collection of fluid identities. There are two ways in which the concept of identity impacts the artist-performer: the artist-performer’s sense of worth related to self and product, and the fluency of artistic expression.

The performer’s identity as “artist” is subject to self-criticism as well as to criticism by the audience. The artist’s cultivated perceptions of these criticisms create reactive patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, which can either evolve creative output or impede it. Classical yoga provides a method for bringing these otherwise unconscious patterns into consciousness, allowing the artists to objectively assess and develop their work. Otherwise, the artist-performer experiences aversion to identities such as “failure” or “loser,” and attachment to identities such as “success” or “winner.”

When artist-performers move beyond the designations of success or failure, they are free to play with identity in an intentionally fluid way. For example, the thespian may act out multiple aspects of a single character such as parent, lover and friend. The musician may shape temperaments within the same work to represent characters such as hero, victim, or villain. The dancer may assume the role of flower, swan or warrior. Additionally, through the scope of their work, the artist-performers may assume the identity of activist, advocate, or peacemaker.

The freedom to assume any given identity is facilitated through the practice of classical yoga, the intentional direction of one’s consciousness through which the experience of an ultimate identification with intrinsic Self arises.

KEY WORDS: yoga, creativity, performance, identity, Patanjali

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Introduction: Is Ben Platt a Yogi?

Every gesture of teenage awkwardness had been perfected. Not only was I watching this character, Evan Hansen, I was fully absorbed in the character...inside his mind, his heart, his breath. The way Ben Platt floated to the pinnacle moment in a melody, allowing the impact of his own tears to tip a note to fall, creating just enough instability in the vocal technique to capture the fragility of the emotionally heightened moment... The fidgeting of the hands along the belt line of his pants, the shifting of weight between the almost too big Converse shoes, short anxious gasps for air between words to survive the anxiety of an uncomfortable encounter.... He had captured and integrated the physical, emotional, and mental angst of the socially awkward teenager into an intuitive expression of the whole character – not only flawless vocal and theatrical technique, but total presence, total embodiment, and total personification of the role. I thought to myself, “Is Ben Platt a yogi?”¹

As both a trained musician and yoga practitioner/teacher, I have found consistent parallels between the practice and performance of music and the practice and states of full absorption experienced in yoga. Practice of any art is the means by which we not only refine skill and technique, but also confront ego, meet opportunities to expose conditioned physical and mental patterns, and explore acceptance and vulnerability. Practice also provides the artist-performer opportunities to develop discernment regarding what is and is not working artistically and personally and presents creative choices regarding how to develop and present our work as well as evolve and express our lives. This too is the practice of yoga.

While Westerners think of yoga as the practice of physical postures, the inquiry of classical yogic philosophy is actually one of identity, particularly as outlined in the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali. In simplest terms, the integration of the physical and mental practices of yoga supports direct experience of intrinsic Self, an ultimate unchanging reality, which is differentiated from transient self, a collection of fluid identities. There are two ways in which the concept of identity impacts the performer: the artist’s sense of worth related to self and product, and the fluency of artistic expression.

The performer’s identity as “artist” is subject to self-criticism as well as to criticism by the audience. The artist’s cultivated perceptions of these criticisms create reactive patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, which can either advance creative output or impede it. Classical yoga provides a primary method for bringing these otherwise unconscious patterns into consciousness, allowing the artist to objectively assess and develop their work. Otherwise, the artist experiences aversion to identities such as “failure” or “loser,” and attachment to identities such as “success” or “winner.” These aversions and attachments bind the artist-performer to limited identifications.

When artists move beyond the designations of success or failure, they are free to play with identity in an intentionally fluid way. For example, the thespian may act out multiple aspects of a single character such as parent, lover and friend. The musician may shape temperaments within the same work to represent characters such as hero, victim, or villain. The dancer may assume the role of flower, swan or warrior. Additionally, through the scope of their work, artist-performers may assume the identity of activist, advocate, or peacemaker.

Actor and musician Ben Platt intentionally shifted his identity for the performance of *Dear Evan Hansen*. He assumed the role of Evan Hansen. Within that character, he fluctuated between identities of son, friend, advocate, and orchard owner. The broad impact of *Dear Evan Hansen*, and Ben Platt’s role in it, includes heightened collective discourse on social anxiety, the struggles of single mothers, drug abuse, and the manipulative potential of social media. Is Ben Platt a yogi? I would dare to say, yes.

The Fundamental Concept of Identity in Sāṃkhya and Yoga

Sāṃkhya and Yoga are two related schools within the six orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy. Sāṃkhya, believed to be the oldest and therefore an influence on all, is a dualist philosophy which explores identification with intrinsic Self (*puruṣa*) or the transient self (*prakṛiti*).² A fundamental understanding of the distinction between *puruṣa* or intrinsic Self and *prakṛiti* or transient self is indispensable to the artist-performer’s application of the teachings of Yoga.

Puruṣa is most easily understood as a source of illumination and *prakṛiti* as that which is illuminated. Consider the analogy of a simple stationary light bulb in an old film projector. The light bulb illuminates the reel of film; each still image quickly projected across the screen provides the appearance of scenes, characters, and stories. Identification with

the projected images represents absorption in the transient self, *prakriti*. Identification with the light bulb represents absorption in intrinsic Self, *puruṣa*. Integration of both *prakriti* and *puruṣa* leads to direct experiences of an identity that encompasses both; the key to creative freedom. Enlightened artist-performers recognize that they can change the reel at any given time, illuminating an identification of their choosing.

Sāṃkhya is an enumerationist philosophy which assigns aspects of the transient self into various categories inclusive of the individual's sensory relationship to the elements. While yoga derives its ontology and epistemology from Sāṃkhya, it has developed a systematic application of integrated practices including concentration, meditation, and full absorption.³ In contrast to the intellectual investigations of Sāṃkhya, yogic practices ultimately support direct experiences of the intrinsic Self. This is the yoga that Patanjali succinctly outlines in the *Yoga Sūtras* (100 BC - 500 CE).⁴ His codification of the system of Classical Yoga may be the earliest surviving writing on performance psychology, later mirrored by works such as Arthur Koestler's "fluency" in *The Act of Creation* (1964) and in more recent decades Mihály Csíkszentmihályi's "flow" in his seminal work *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1990).

THE OPENING YOGA SUTRAS⁵

1.1 *Atha yōgānuśāsanam*

Now, the continued inquiry of yoga.

1.2 *Yōgaścittavṛtti-nirodhaḥ*

Yoga is channeling of the habitual fluctuations of the mind.

1.3 *Tadā draṣṭuḥ svarūpe'vasthānam*

Then the seer (for our purpose the artist-performer) resides in an intrinsic identity.

1.4 *Vṛtti-Sārūpyamitaratra*

Otherwise, (the artist-performer) is absorbed in fluctuating identities.

These first four sutras of Patanjali's work encapsulate the entire practice of yoga. The word yoga is derived from the Sanskrit root *yuj*, which translates to yoke, to bind or unite. Yoga is often simplistically defined as the union of body, mind and spirit. Even B.K.S. Iyengar, a leading authority on yogic philosophy, subscribes to this surface definition in *The Tree of Yoga*, but qualifies it, describing it as more or less a good place to start "for our level of understanding."⁶ The goal of classical yoga is not to unite but rather to cultivate consistent distinction between identification with *puruṣa* or *prakriti*.⁷ So what then is the artist-performer yoking? The mind.

Patanjali suggests many ways of yoking the mind (yoga) in order to more precisely recognize this distinction including focusing on the syllable OM (1.28), intentional direction of the breath (1.34), and cultivating compassion and equanimity (1.33). He also suggests that the practitioner may yoke the mind by focusing on any object or image one chooses (1.39). Therefore the object of the mind for the artist-performer can become specific elements of the creative process itself, including the sensory experiences of practice and performance, the techniques involved in the acquisition of skill, and the intentional assumption of single or multiple identities in order to facilitate creative expression. Just as an ox is yoked to a plow, the artist-performer's mind can be yoked to an object of creative process.

In this sense, knowingly or not artist-performers engage in the practice of yoga every time they are intentionally present in practice or performance. This yoking to the present moment, with awareness and discernment, is the act of "*cittavṛtti-nirodhaḥ*" (Sutra 1.2) – that is, channeling the habitual fluctuations of the mind. The yoga of creative process, the consistent and effortless guiding of the mind back to the present moment of creation, circulates between a trio of states: concentration, meditation and full absorption. These are aspects of fluency or flow, described by Koestler and Csíkszentmihályi. The balance this paper seeks is to more directly address how identification, with intrinsic self or transient Self, supports or hinders fluency or flow in relationship to unconscious versus purposeful habitual conditioning.

The artist-performer brings unconscious habitual patterns into consciousness through a cultivated awareness of intrinsic and transient identities. These habits include not only the physical patterns required to perform the technique of the art, but also the emotional and behavioral patterns and reactions associated with practice, performance, and the artist's identity in general. Conditioned patterns that remain unexamined or outside of the performer's awareness can lead to mental frustration, physical injury, and creative blocks. Because these unconscious and habitual cycles can show up again and again in seeming infinite subtle variations, like the transposition of a familiar song into a different key, I have assigned the term Transpositional Cycle.

TRANSPITIONAL CYCLE – Unconscious Habit

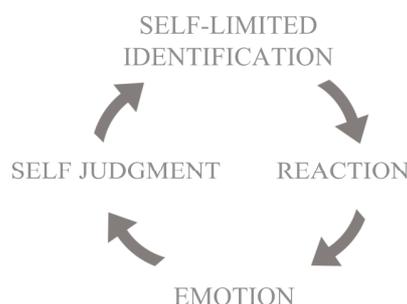


Fig.1: Limited Identification (1.4) – Reaction (2.3) – Emotion (1.31) – Self-Judgment (1.30)

The Transpositional Cycle includes beliefs and behaviors rooted in the perception of a limited identity, or more generally in a narrow collection of transient identities. For the artist-performer, that may include limiting identifications such as “actor,” “musician,” or “thespian,” as well as “success,” “winner,” or “acclaimed.” Reactions of attachment and aversion to labels and experiences arise as a means to protect the ego’s limited view of persona. If the artist-performer experiences feelings of inadequacy as a reflection of the past, depression results. If this yields presumptions that future performances will be inadequate, anxiety arises. If the artist-performer clings to praise only to be met with criticism however mild, self-judgment arises. Self-judgment rooted either in the past or in projections of the future only strengthens the already imprinted grooves of limited identification, creating doubt, apathy, and even greed.⁸ In such cases, conditioned habits control creativity, rather than permitting choices based on awareness of habitual patterning and discernment.

To more fully understand Transpositional Cycles, I suggest that we further unpack the second sutra of Patanjali: *Yōgaścittavṛtti-nirodhaḥ*. *Citta* is most often translated as “consciousness” but is not limited to the Western definition of consciousness as merely wakefulness or an awareness of one’s surroundings. *Citta*, as it is utilized here, refers to three internal phenomena: 1) the categorizing nature of the mind which seeks to label experience, 2) the ego which seeks to relate that experience to individual survival based on a limited identification with the transient self, and 3) the more fully-realized ability to discern benefit or detriment beyond the initial reactive nature of the ego, based on direct experience of the intrinsic Self.

The root of *vṛtti*, *vṛt*, translates to “revolve.” *Vṛtti* is often translated simply as whirlpool, revolution or fluctuation. However, when used as a suffix, it translates as “in the habit of.”⁹ *Cittavṛtti* therefore refers to the fluctuating habits of *citta*, the mind-ego-discernment triad. Unhelpful Transpositional Cycles develop and continue when the faculty of discernment goes unemployed: mind and ego engage in a perpetual whirling waltz trapped between repeat bars. And, the ego will attach to any pattern it perceives to be in its service. Thus, these transpositional cycles of *cittavṛtti* create mental, physical and emotional ruts that habituate one’s thoughts, behaviors, and identities. This is very much how the brain creates neuro-pathways through a process called myelination.¹⁰ A trail through the woods is created by traveling the same path over and over again.

Thus, mental habits can work for us, or against us. “Practice makes perfect” is the old adage, but practicing imperfect technique or in the absence of clear intention can reinforce unproductive habits and even result in physical or psychological injury. As Shinichi Suzuki, founder of the Suzuki method, said, “Knowledge is not skill. Knowledge plus 10,000 times is skill.” *Cittavṛtti*, habitual conditioning, may serve the artist-performer’s cultivation of skill, but also runs the risk of veiling experience of an intrinsic identity, leading to unnecessarily limited identification(s).

Analogy of the After Concert Dessert

Eva had just given a wonderful debut recital performance at Carnegie Hall. She headed out with friends to New York City’s West Village for a dessert at Dolce Vizio. A friend had recommended the specialty dessert café for its famous selection of the Italian cake tiramisu. As they approached the café, Eva’s sensory perception began to fire. She became totally absorbed in the rich smells of dark roasted coffee and baked pastries and the sights and sounds of the festive colorful atmosphere. Eva was not disappointed. The flavors were complex: the texture of fresh ladyfingers was accompanied by a well-bodied espresso and smooth sweet cream. Magnificent recital. Magnificent friends. Magnificent dessert. The markers of success.

A couple of weeks after Eva’s New York debut she experienced a typical post-recital slump. Although she had received great reviews her friends were no longer talking about the performance. Success was quickly becoming a distant memory. Without a performance goal, she was not motivated to practice. As she was walking home she passed a dessert shop and saw that tiramisu was on the menu. She (and her ego) remembered the positive impact of the experience

including feelings of acceptance and success. She stopped for more tiramisu. This time the lady fingers were a little soggy and the espresso was bitter: still it mimicked the debut experience and the caffeine gave her an energetic boost which helped her to return to the practice room. The Transpositional Cycle had begun, unbeknownst to Eva.

Before long, Eva stopped each day on her way home for a serving of tiramisu before afternoon practice. She *had* to have it. If something interfered with her pre-practice ritual, she became agitated and irritable. After a few months, Eva began noticing that her jeans were tight, she was having trouble sleeping, and just as her pre-practice ritual had become a monotonous act of consuming tiramisu, her practice had become formulaic, devoid of creative expression. At this moment of realization, Eva's faculty of discernment had finally surfaced. The next time Eva passed the dessert shop she hesitated momentarily, then continued walking home where she had a peacefully productive practice, *sans* tiramisu.

Taking a moment to recognize that perceptions are often distorted, limited, biased, and related to unconscious habitual conditioning is a crucial first step toward creative freedom. This moment of pause to consider one's habits, as Eva did on her last pass by the dessert shop, is *nirodhah*. *Nirodhah*, referring to exercising pause before action, whether in thought, word, or deed, is what the Buddhists refer to as Mindfulness. *Nirodhah* is often misunderstood as "to cease," "stop" or "remove" but is more accurately translated as "to control," "channel" or "moderate." It is in this space of awareness that one finds the discernment to inform choice, to consciously guide, restrain, or moderate conditioned identification, *cittavrtti*. The goal is not to permanently cease *cittavrtti* (habitual conditioning), but rather to reside in a state of heightened awareness that allows for an intentionally fluid identification. Consider that it is *cittavrtti* that creates the visual experience of a sunset, the tactile experience of a swim in the ocean, the aural experience of a Beethoven symphony, or the mental and emotional experiences of love. *Nirodhah* thus presents an opportunity to bring the unconscious into consciousness and invites the possibility for personal and creative transformation and freedom.

Frederick Matthias Alexander, Shakespearean orator and founder of the Alexander Technique, spent years engaged in self-study seeking solutions to his own voice loss. He determined that he had been engaged in patterns of postural contraction related particularly to his theatrical speech. A primary component of the Alexander Technique is "inhibition," an intentional pause employed to break the cycle of habitual action.¹¹ From that space of pause (*nirodhah*), artist-performers intentionally put themselves in a place of choice: They can exercise discernment over self-judgment, equanimity over emotional instability, and responsible action over reaction, leading to even more expansive freedom of choice. From this place of choice and intentional action the artist-performer can create what I call Transformational Cycles.

TRANSFORMATIONAL CYCLE – Purposeful Habit

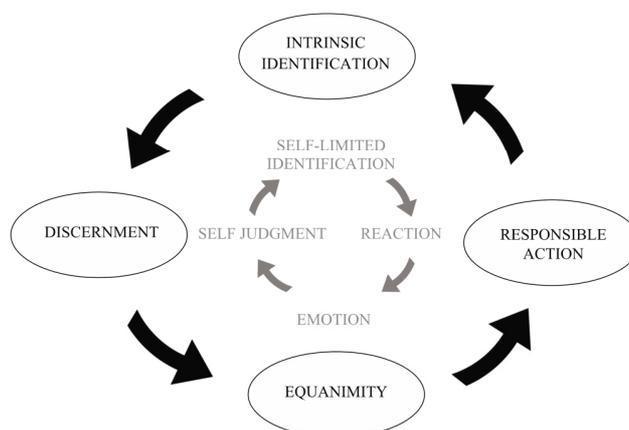


Fig. 2: Intrinsic Identification (1.3) – Discernment (2.26) – Equanimity (1.33) – Response-able (2.33) Action (2.1)

The first step in moving to a transformational cycle is to interrupt the transpositional cycle. Often it is a teacher, director, or coach who brings the artist-performer's attention to the unconscious habitual pattern, such as an inefficient fingering in the case of a pianist, a facial or verbal tic in the case of the thespian, or the overuse of a group of muscles in the case of a dancer. The practice of yoga encourages this efficacious interruption of the habituated cycle to arise from artist-performers themselves, through a constant practice of intrinsic and transient self-awareness. Rather than unconsciously deepening habits that may or may not be of benefit, the practitioner remembers to pause and objectively evaluate thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. The practitioner then discerns, with equanimity, which patterns and identities are valuable and which are detrimental. From a place of awareness, the artist-performer can intentionally choose which patterns and identities to either utilize or transform. As Jane Hirshfield states in *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry*

(1997), “Violinists practicing scales and dancers repeating the same movements over decades are not simply warming up or mechanically training their muscles. They are learning how to attend unswervingly, moment by moment, to themselves and their art; learning to come into steady presence, free from the distractions of interest or boredom.”¹²

Perpetuating a state of *yōgaścittavṛtti-nirodhaḥ* demands undeviating concentration and discernment. Even for the seasoned practitioner of yoga or the creative arts, overcoming obstacles and distractions is a constant battle. Patanjali prepares the practitioner by heightening awareness to these obstacles and distractions: limited identification, ego, attachment, aversion, fear of death (2.3), disease, idleness, doubt, carelessness, laziness, greed, confusion, lack of concentration, and instability (1.30). Just as hikers watch the trail so as not to trip or step in a hole, artist-performers look out for the traps that bind them in transpositional cycles.

A Jump in Identity

Luc was a principal danseur for the New York City Ballet. In order to secure this position he had spent fifteen years studying the art of dance, performing with a wide variety of companies in diverse venues, and surviving the process of winning many auditions. The acquisition of this role provided Luc with a significant amount of confidence and a very healthy ego. While performing the Act II variation in the role of Albrect from *Giselle* (ironically a plot about a man who assumes a false identity), Luc felt excruciating pain in his back upon landing from a jump. In possession of a strong will, Luc finished the performance but learned within the next week that he had ruptured a lumbar disc and that this would require surgery. His dance career was over. Luc experienced the months that followed with a great sense of failure, depression related to his loss of purpose, and anxiety about his future. Opioids prescribed for pain also masked his emotional suffering. His identity as an artist-performer had been crushed – who was he if not the principal danseur – or for that matter, a dancer at all?

The dis-ease of Luc’s body chipped away at his healthy ego, giving way to doubt, apathy, and instability. In a moment of pause, *nirodhaḥ*, Luc recognized the transpositional cycle of addiction and depression. He sought counseling. With professional help, he cultivated an intentionally objective way of seeing his circumstances and weaned himself from opioids, processed the grief of losing his identity as a dancer, and from a place of equanimity redirected the compilation of his life experiences towards transforming his self-identity from dancer to choreographer.

When artist-performers move beyond the designations of success or failure, and willingly surrender attachment to narrow sets of identities, they are free to play with identity in an intentionally fluid way. For example, the thespian may act out multiple aspects of a single character such as parent, lover and friend. The musician may shape temperaments within the same work to represent characters such as hero, victim, or villain. The dancer may assume the role of flower, swan or warrior.

Lastly, the artist-performer may assume the identity of activist, advocate, or peacemaker. Through the scope and content of creative work, in consideration of impact, output and volume of audience consumption, the artist-performer has the ability, through that work, to not only initiate but also to sustain dialogues that support social activism or advocacy. Lin Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton* employed a racially diverse cast to portray the racially homogeneous American founders, sparking a flurry of discourse. London National Theater’s production of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* advocated for inclusive opportunities for persons with Asperger’s Syndrome. Pacifist Benjamin Britten’s grand-scale work *War Requiem* encourages reflection on war’s impact on society. Art and artist-performers have the opportunity, some may even say responsibility, to cultivate intentional awareness, and in turn to bring awareness to bear against collective habitual patterns, of bias, violence, and injustice in themselves, their communities, and the world.

Contributor Bio

Lisa Garner Santa serves as Artist-Performer and Professor of Flute at Texas Tech University where she enjoys a career as soloist, recitalist, and teacher. Garner Santa's playing is described as "the kind of tone I prefer - rich, colorful, perfectly in control, and always in tune...a truly remarkable artist with dazzling musical ability." (American Record Guide) As a pedagogue, she presents classes throughout the United States and abroad including locations such as the Royal College of Music in London, Victoria University in Wellington, and Peking University in Beijing. Research, pedagogical articles and interviews are published in *The Flutist Quarterly* and *Flute Talk* among other journals. As a member of the National Flute Association, Garner Santa serves as a featured performer at conventions, was Program Chair for the 2011 convention, and contributed two years on the NFA Executive Committee. She is a recipient of the TTU President's Excellence in Teaching Award, is a member of the Executive Council of TTU’s prestigious Teaching Academy and is a graduate of TTU's Institute for Inclusive Excellence. In addition to flute, Garner Santa teaches *Yoga and the Creative Arts: Philosophy and Practice*, a core curriculum course at TTU. She is an E-RYT500 Kripalu Yoga Professional.

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Notes

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- ¹ In August 2015, I attended an early production of Dear Evan Hansen in the Washington D.C. Arena Stage, an intimate theater that focuses on innovative and diverse productions by American artists. The Arena Stage's vision statement is one that explores identity: "...to galvanize the transformative power of theater to understand who we are as Americans." The musical found its way to Broadway's Music Box Theater and in 2017 won six Tony Awards, including Best New Musical. Ben Platt received the award for Best Performance by an Actor in a Leading Role.
- ² Ian Whicher, *The Integrity of the Yoga Darsana: A Reconsideration of Classical Yoga*, (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1998) 46. The reference to intrinsic identity is taken from Whicher's translation of *puruṣa*.
- ³ Karl H. Potter, *The Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies, Vol. 12: Yoga: India's Philosophy of Meditation*, ed. Ram Shankar Bhattacharya, Gerald James Larson, and Karl H. Potter, (Motilal Banarsidass, 2008) 33.
- ⁴ Edwin F. Bryant, *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali: A New Edition, Translation and Commentary*, (New York, New York: North Point Press, 2009) xxxiv.
- ⁵ M. [Mandyam] A. [Anandanpallai] Jayashree, *Yoga Sutrani of Maharishi Patanjali and Stotrani*, (Mysore, India: Anantha Research Foundation, 2017) 5-6. Future references to specific sutras will appear in the text as chapter:verse. Translations by Lisa Garner Santa unless otherwise noted.
- ⁶ B.K.S. Iyengar, *The Tree of Yoga*, (Oxford, England: Fine Line Books, Ltd., 1988) 3.
- ⁷ Edwin F Bryant, *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali: A New Edition, Translation and Commentary*, (New York, New York: North Point Press, 2009) xlvi.
- ⁸ Gregor Maehle, *Ashtanga Yoga: Practice and Philosophy*, (Australia: Kaivala Publications, 2006) 1. Maehle sites K. Pattabhi Jois' teaching of the six enemies according to Hindu theology: desire, anger, greed, illusion, infatuation, and envy.
- ⁹ Sanskrit Dictionary for Spoken Sanskrit, spokensanskrit.org,
http://spokensanskrit.org/index.php?tran_input=vRtti&direct=se&script=hk&link=yes&mode=3.
- ¹⁰ J.L. Salzer and B. Zalc, "Myelination," *Current Biology* 26, no. 20 (October 24, 2016): R971.
- ¹¹ David Moore, *Yoga and the Alexander Technique* (Australia: Einstein's Moon, 2015) 24.
- ¹² Jane Hirshfield, *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry*, (New York, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998) 4.