

Loose Notes on Woman & Yoga

[a working paper]

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Man is so weak that he needs the protection of a woman's desire.

Lawrence Durrell, Quinx, 1984

1. If you haven't noticed

The Art of Yoga appears to have existed as a near exclusive male endeavour since a very distant period in history. Well, be this as it may, it is interesting to note that the Sanskrit word for yogi, which is yogin, has a feminine correspondent, yogini. The simple existence of this word alone is evidence enough that distinctive feminine forms of yoga once existed. This also shows that in the pre-historic past it was not only men that were masters of yoga. Since the tragic disappearance of its feminine forms, the History of Yoga has been blindly groping through a long Dark Age as the authors of its treatises, its teachers and its saints have almost been exclusively of the non-female gender. Today there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

In Guru Chaud's rediscovered postmodern yoga, sexual proclivities are not only discerned but actively, honestly and explicitly explored. What is more, the basic approaches and aims of this highly refined ascetic \art are not the same for men and women.

Not only in the West but all around the globe, unqualified people are dabbling with the Eastern esoteric sciences "like children playing with fire." This is effortlessly witnessed in the broad scale attempt to apply a prevalence of generic gymno-yogic practice to males and females equally without consideration of essential gender differences.

"If you haven't noticed," Chaud remarked one day,

a woman's body is different from a man's—especially her emotions and inner energies. So you have to adjust the yoga training according to the sex because certain exercises that are effective for a man might harm a woman if she tries to do them. In brief, you have to treat men and women differently.

The reasons are clear. Yoga has a very strong affect on the endocrine system, the pancreas and thyroid, parathyroid, suprarenal, pituitary and sex glands. These glands in turn have direct effect on the body's highly sensitive hormonal balance and thereby the person's emotions. It is hazardous to tamper with this delicate system, especially for women who risk becoming unattractively hard and losing their natural feminine softness. Yoga should be viewed as a gentle meditative dance.

2. The epistemology of beauty

Aesthetics is essential to the Art of yoga. Its principles of beauty are based on an inner exfoliation. It taps the font of elegance and health. When practiced correctly one easily observes the enhancement of a natural inner grace. As awareness of the aesthetic process increases, likewise the vastness of a newly sourced potency. The senses get revived with sudden alertness and assertively cut to the core of the matter.

Here we have the Epistemological School of Beauty where the person's social being, his gender – his sex! – can never be abstracted from the natural responses and inclinations that weave the mystical zone of expanse. We are men and women living to be beautiful, one for the other and each for ourselves. To know the beautiful, one

has to be beautiful. In order to be beautiful, one must feel. Or as Nijinsky wrote somewhere in his Diary: "I am beauty and perfection. I feel..."

Yet with yoga and sensation being infinite bed friends, the problem is you'll likely never get to sleep. Time for a little pillow talk?

3. Woman as ultimate spiritual vessel

India is truly a land of living saints. By "saints," I suppose, I speak of people that abandon family and social status and wander where they will, and who sustain themselves through the kindness of devotees. Yet due to the idealized roles ascribed to woman as housebound daughter, wife and mother, there have been a very sparing few women saints in India. Still those who manage to achieve liberation are accorded great reverence, even deified.

In the centuries, indeed, the long millennia that followed the extinction of the ancient forms of feminine yoga, many new male forms of ascetic technology emerged on the scene. These highly masculinised modes of asceticism laid tremendous store in the esoteric interpretation of prana (breath) as the universal life-force. The designers, theoreticians and curators of these highly exploratory ascetics-arts projects were part of a wide-ranging religious movement generally designated by the term yoga tantra. Such tantric yogins were comparable to sorcerers who practiced varieties of internalized alchemy with the aim of evolving an immortal "diamond body."

But the ancient yogini, or female yoga adept, appears to have had no hand at all in the drafting of these early, say, "medieval" yoga-tantric texts. She was not, however, excluded from their formulae; but distinctly acknowledged for her saintly demeanour and beaconing other-worldliness—and as a consequence conferred the

monumental stature of Great Goddess Shakti and adored as the ultimate manifestation of nature's mysterious life-giving force. She was no longer viewed as a distractive presence, but as the ultimate spiritual means or vessel for the tantric yogin's emancipation. This naturally prompted a highly ennobling and super-sensual view of sexuality that sought to engage the activity of the libido and other subliminal human tendencies. The tantric yogi was said to be proficient in transcending the plane of gross sexuality and thereby aligning his yoga-fied being with the loftiest realms of saintliness. But these tantric operations always underscored that the "amorous coupling" had as its objective something quite discrete from the flow of procreative excretions.

But are the parties involved in these mystical approaches even regarded as sexual beings? The question is germane. But even more important: they are "sensual" beings. Yet it needs be comprehended that this mode sensuality surpasses what we typically regard as physicality. It has no underlying procreative urge. So their sex is wholly "astral," to use a vague term; it is sex without pregnancy, sex without VD. And so in this sense, yes, they are purely sexual beings—at least to the extent that they are willing and capable of casting aside their foreign robes of flesh.

4. Fourth sex yogis or entombed in a body?

It could even be proposed that these yoginis and yogis constitute a variant gender role, exhibiting a third or even fourth sexual variant. I note gender studies Professor Serena Nanda who in her *Gender Diversity: Crosscultural Variations* (2000), brings to our attention how the majority of Euro-American cultures have based recognition of sex and gender on a bipolar system of oppositions – male vs. female, man vs. woman. These cultures have furthermore focused almost solely on the

genitalia as the identifying and determining factor of sex and gender roles. But these notions are not at all shared universally, as observed for example in the cultures of the Philippines, Native Americans and Polynesia, et al. And yet within the predominating Euro-American bipolar model, variations of sex and gender role are still clearly recognized, for example androgyny, alternative sexes and genders, gender crossing, transvestism, and gender liminality.¹ Where might a tantric practitioner fit in?

You are living (maybe sleeping) in a body. It's a fact. You have an intimate relation with a human body—but you're not the body. It is a curious conjunction (you in the body) costumed undetectable in foreign robes of flesh as you persist oblivious to the luxury afforded you (otherwise) only through the process of death as you stubbornly continue asleep in the body, profound amnesiacs lost in the shadow play of a consciousness entombed in a brain in a body.

Feel free to explore these fathom-long bodies
Joined by the rarefied currents running through you.
Dilate the vein in a buoyant sense to traverse
Dour brainwave and pointillistic vision.
Bore to the unoccupy-able space
And dissolve in the mystic zone of expanse.
Meta-current lovers on private jihad
Brilliant, in the body, insurgents of creation.
You're a house in the wind, your windows are all open.

¹ Serena Nanda, *Gender Diversity: Crosscultural Variations*, 2000.

5. Develop a community

As a wandering teacher I travel a great deal. I never stay in one place very long. In the winter of 1996-97, I halted in Taiwan and conducted an intensive month-long seminar at a certain Buddhist monastery near Taichung. My students were all young nuns. It was a smashing success.

But it's a fact these days that yoga practice is far more popular with women than with men. This goes not only for the physical training, but for contemplative abstract practices too. These appeal more to women than men. I wonder why? Maybe it's because in order to learn yoga one has to be open to one's vulnerability, one has to be somehow flexible already. Well, whatever the reason, I always feel privileged to be able to instruct and educate women. In return I always learn a lot from them. Recently I heard an evocative phrase: If you educate a man, you develop an individual. If you educate a woman, you develop a community.

6. Feminine realms

There is a question very often asked of me. This question expresses a common concern about the possible conflict between so-called Buddhist Vipassana meditation and Yoga. But it's always men who ask this question. I wonder why. Are men less able to let go of structures? Maybe this proves that in spite of its history, yoga endures as a feminine domain. This reminds me of the rather sensational topic: the semi-legendary "female-realms" that were known in ancient India. They are called Stri-rajya.

Likened to the ancient Greek legend of an Amazonian kingdom, the Indians recognized the legendary stri-rajya; women-ruled nations where men were a small

minority and only used as labourers. There are a number of citations of these legendary states in Sanskrit, Chinese and Arabic literature. The famous 7th century CE Chinese traveller Huan-Tsang cites two female kingdoms in his commentaries. Recently historian Anthony Reid, in attempting to contextualize and broadly map the "mythic mind" of archipelagic Southeast Asian peoples, drew attention to the early credence given to stories of bizarre savages that lived in distant islands or mountain valleys.

[I]n one mysterious island there were only women, who became pregnant by the wind and put their male children to death ... local informants of Pires put the...island of women off the coast of Sumatra; those of Pigafetta put...the latter south of Java.... The notion of an island of women somewhere in the Indian Archipelago was reported by Chinese writers as early as the sixth century and Arabs in the tenth...."²

However only two classic Indian writers make important mention of Stri-rajya. I will first make mention Vatsyayana, the celebrated fourth-century CE author of Kama Sutra. Vatsyayana notes two Stri-rajyas, thought to have existed variously in Afghanistan, Orissa, Assam, Nepal, and Tibet or on a distant island in the middle of the Indian Ocean. In his famously explicit manual of eroticism and social conduct, Vatsyayana describes these "matriarchal countries" as places where "violent practices and brutal sexual behaviour are required" to satisfy the women, where "dildos are much employed," and where women often hide young men in their apartments for sexual use.³

² Anthony Reid, *Charting the Shape of Early Modern Southeast Asia*, 2000: 157, 179 n 3.

³ Kama Sutra (2.5.27; 2.6.45-46), cited in Walter Penrose, 18-19 (see below, note 7). When citing Kama Sutra, Penrose quotes mainly from Alain Danielou, trans., *The Complete Kama Sutra: The First Unabridged Modern Translation of the Classic Indian Text*, 1994.

According to the popular writer Benjamin Walker, 'the women of these states were possessed of extraordinary beauty and seductiveness. They were adept in magic and the ability to lure men into their domains, and to extract their seed without having intercourse. They then used the seed to impregnate themselves. They gave birth to girls or boys. Girls were for keeping a stable female population and boys were for doing manual labour and providing a fresh supply of seed. These women were also "full of impetuous desire,"⁴ Their passions could not be gratified by normal sexual intercourse with men but rather in a sort of communal orgy with a number of men and women devoting themselves to the orgasm of those females who were in the grip of passion (oestrus) and ready to make love. The men indulged with one woman after the other or collectively. In the words of one Hindu text, One man holds her down, another unites with her, a third massages her lips; a fourth man kisses her all over.⁵ Sometimes the women had themselves thrashed till they bled, some favoured Sapphism.⁶

7. Wandering nuns & erotic ascetics

The mere indication of stri-rajya alone reveals that women in ancient India had for various reasons sought out gender-role variants that were counter to the customary 'secluded virgin, wife and mother' as prescribed in the time-honoured Dharma-sutras, ancient India's Legal Code (ca. 7th-5th century BCE).

⁴ "The women of the Stri Rajya...are full of impetuous desire, their semen falls in large quantities and they are fond of taking medicine to make it do so." Kama Sutra, chapter 5, "On Biting, and the means of being employed with regard to women of different countries." Sir Richard Burton, trans., Kamasutra of Vatsyayana, 1883.

⁵ Italics mine. Comment: Vatsyayana's assumption that men also lived in Stri-rajya has recently been challenged, citing myth and fable as the main source of his evidence. See R.N. Saletore, Sex Life under Indian Rulers, 1974, 155-71, cited in Penrose, 18.

⁶ Benjamin Walker, Hindu World, 1968. Vol. 2:432.

Walter Penrose ("Hidden in History," 2001)⁷ shows great interest in the subject of female homoeroticism in South Asia. His excellent article attempts to examine the prevailing "gender-role variants" particular to ancient India. One such role was the wandering female mendicant (yogini, sadhin, parivrajika, etc.) who appears throughout Sanskrit literature, sometimes in quite surprising situations. By becoming ascetics, ancient Indian women were choosing a lifestyle independent of men. Commonly recognized by their shaven heads, they were able to move through societal structures, as would widows, musicians, actresses, and 'experts in affairs of love.'

8. Kautilya

The second and probably more important ancient writer to have cited Stri-rajya is Kautilya (c. 350–283 BCE), who is also identified as Chanakya. Kautilya acted as the key advisor to the first Maurya Emperor Chandragupta (340-298 BCE) whose grandson was the more famous Emperor Ashoka, both of whom reigned across Ganges plain. In his Arthashastra, a classical treatise on government and security, Kautilya makes note of female mendicants that served as royal messengers. He even gives instructions on employing them as agents and spies:

A wandering nun may be a Brahmin (parivaraika)⁸ or from another sect (vrshala) with their heads shaven. Such agents shall be recruited from poor but intrepid widows, who need to work for their living. They shall be treated with honour in the palace so that they may go into the houses of high officials freely.⁹

⁷ Walter Penrose, "Hidden in History: Female Homoeroticism and Women of a 'Third Nature' in the South Asian Past," originally cited in *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 10.1, (Jan. 2001), 3-39. Online, http://muse.jhu.edu/cgi-bin/access.cgi?uri=/journals/journal_of_the_history_of_sexuality/v010/10.1penrose.html

⁸ Parivrajika is a broad designation for a diverse pre-Buddhist class of ascetic commonly characterized by its wandering and abodeless status.

⁹ Kautilya, *Arthashastra* 1.12.4-5, trans. Rangarajan, 1992: 505, cited in Penrose, 21.

But these undercover ascetic spys could also be used to test the loyalties of the king's own ministers, writes Kautilya:

For the kama or "passion" test, a wandering nun shall be used to gain the confidence of a minister in order to convey the suggestion that the Queen is in love with him. Much wealth and a meeting with her shall be promised. If any minister refuses to be tempted, he is clean.¹⁰

By renouncing motherhood and married life and adopting the role of a wandering ascetic, these independent women acquired "safe haven" through a variant gender role and accessed a viable economic support system. They furthermore gained the opportunity, notes Penrose, "to adopt some features of androgynous dress (hairstyle, in particular), and to have homoerotic relations with other women."¹¹ Vatsyayana draws similar allusions by describing "female ascetics" as possible teachers of adolescent girls in the arts of love¹² and by raising the point that wandering nuns served as go-betweens to arrange secret trysts between lovers.¹³

But tis really does suggest, as O'Flaherty remarks, that in ancient India "asceticism" was defined very differently than it was in the West. Because it's

...not entirely clear that "ascetic" women always refrained from having sex with men, and it is even less clear that they refrained from having sex with other women. To the Westerner, this may seem confusing, since "ascetics" are expected to have sex with no one.¹⁴

¹⁰ Kautilya, 1.10, trans. Rangarajan: 508, cited in Penrose, 20.

¹¹ Penrose, 21.

¹² Kama Sutra 1.3.14, cited in Penrose, 20.

¹³ Kama Sutra, 5.4, cited in Penrose.

¹⁴ See Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Siva: The Erotic Ascetic*, 1973, cited in Penrose, 21.

9. Why did women found "women only" states?

In spite of ancient India's ostensible tolerance to a comparatively complex system of gender variances—marked, in particular, by broad acceptance of male-male marriages—there seems to have been nearly no social status conferred on woman-woman relationships. For instance, while both male-male and male-female marriages are mentioned in Kama Sutra,¹⁵ there is no citation of woman-woman conjugality. In Yashodhara's ca. twelfth-century CE Kama Sutra Commentary, one gains a glimpse into the conflicting attitudes towards male and female homoeroticism in early India.

[Male] citizens behave in this kind of inclination, who renounce women and can do without them willingly because they love each other, get married together and are bound by a deep and trusting friendship.

"Do this to me and afterward I will do it to you." Arranging their bodies in contrary positions, they are indifferent to everything in their moments of passion. They are of two kinds, according to whether they are together openly and without complexes, or [secretive]. Women behave in the same way. Sometimes, in the secret of their inner rooms, with total trust in each other, they lick each other's vulva, just like whores.¹⁶

So while men could "marry" and live together openly, same-sex relations between two women were apparently restricted to the "secrecy of their inner rooms." Even more revealing – though of what, I don't know – is that the women are likened to "prostitutes who lick each other's vulvas." This is certainly an area that calls for more research. I will now return to less normative issues.

¹⁵ Kama Sutra (1.1.3, 2.9.36), cited in Penrose 35.

¹⁶ Yashodhara, Jayamangala Commentary on the Kama Sutra 2.8.36, trans. Danielou, 1995, as cited in Penrose, 35, second bracketed word and italics mine.

10. Buddha versus Yoga

When addressing what are mainly men's concerns about the possible conflict between so-called Buddhist and Yoga meditation, it's important that I to speak to them with soothing diplomacy. I need to play the role of nurturing Mother. "Yes, yes," I gently assure them. "It's all right to practice yoga and meditation together. But if you practice meditation very effectively, then you don't need to practice yoga at all!"¹⁷

At other times, I tell them, "That's all right. If you're already practicing 'Buddhist' meditation, then put it up high on the Buddhist altar. If you still want to add a little yoga to your practice, then place it at the bottom," I plainly tell them, "Put yoga down."

In Thailand where I've lived off-and-on for many years, I'm continually confronted with the perennial squabble of "Buddha vs. Yoga." I find it quite absurd. I have seen huge stylized temple murals where in the lower portions yogis or rishis are depicted with erect penises bulging beneath their garments. I recall a composition that grouped such ascetics together with a clutch of masturbating rabbits. Unsurprisingly, the upper portions of these paintings were reserved for reverend members of the Buddhist clergy. This graphically illustrates how over the centuries Thais have been culturally induced to believe that yoga is a corrupt and depraved activity, while generic Buddhist meditation techniques are held as hallowed and inviolable regimes. But the Thais are a very traditional people with deeply inculcated cultural convictions. What is more, their particular world view is worthy of respect. So, "Yoga is the High School of Buddhism," I tell them, "whereas meditation is the University. But how

¹⁷ However, note that vice versa also holds.

many people enter University without first passing through High School?" It is the nature of yoga to assume supporting roles.

11. Where to place your bottom

But before meditation (or abstract reflective), you would benefit greatly by leaning asana. Asana is basic to the practice of yoga. In a restrictive sense, asana means "a seated pose." It's how to fold your legs and where to place bottom. But few of us can sit in "full-lotus pose." Much more common is "half-lotus pose." But whatever the pose you manage to adopt; don't forget that you are still practicing yoga, or yoga asana. I also note that in India, as in Thailand (and elsewhere too), asana is more than just the way you perch your bottom: it refers to the thing you perch your bottom *on*. And so the platform, seat or rug a yogi sits on is also known as his asana. Asana is something that gives firm support.¹⁸

Anyone who hopes to practice meditation should be able to sit with ease and comfort. Your posture should also be firm and stable. Sitting like this, you are practicing yoga. Meditation and yoga are not separate practices. And for this reason it is rightly said that Siddhartha Gautama, the Historical Buddha, achieved emancipation while practicing yoga. According to the legend, the Buddha was sitting in the full-lotus pose as he gained his celebrated liberation.

12. Hatha-yoga – "my body, my meditation"

The most popular and prevalent type of yoga – not only in the West but right around the globe – is typically known as Hatha-yoga. It is often criticized, rightly and wrongly as a physically indulgent discipline that neglects the development of the

¹⁸ Patanjali in Yoga Sutra 46 defines asana as "sthira sukham"; sthira means "enduring," sukham, "bliss."

mind. The most noticeable trait of Hatha-yoga is its extensive use of physical exercises or postures called asanas that go far beyond the seated pose. Understood correctly, these asanas are "attitudes" designed to make the body strong and flexible, balanced and graceful, healthy and fit. Asanas increase the body's reservoir of subtle energy. This accumulated charge is furthermore be used as a focal point in the yogi's meditation. We are speaking of course of the discipline of yoga as essentially a body meditation.

It is worth here repeating that a central theory in Buddhist yoga is that everything we need to know is contained within our "fathom-long body." Doctrine isn't necessary; rites and rituals are also not necessary. Everything one needs to learn is found within one's corporal structure. This is plainly affirmed in the hallowed tradition of Satipatthana-yoga where special attention is placed on the body. One becomes aware of all the 'physiological acts that we have previously performed automatically and unconsciously.'¹⁹ Contemplation of the corporal structure has always been the basis of Buddhist Yoga.²⁰ According to the scriptural words of the Buddha,

It is within this fathom-long body, my friend, with its impressions and ideas that you will find the world, and the cause of the world, and the end of the world, and the strategy that leads to the end of the world.²¹

¹⁹ Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, 1964: 168.

²⁰ See *Maha-Sattipatthana Suttanta*, *Digha-nikaya* (II, 327f.).

²¹ *Anguttara-nikaya*, II, 48.

13. The pristine source

Apart from yoga asanas, or physical postures, a more important yoga study is the respiratory discipline generally known as pranayama. Pranayama means to regulate the breathing and control the vital energy called prana. Initially one learns to relax ones breathing; one learns to breathe slowly, long and deep. The breathing should be gentle and smooth as silk or actually even smoother than silk. That's the most important point. After some minutes your breathing lengthens.

Imagine you are breathing the energy of the sun as the universal source of healing light. Allow the energy to flow where it likes. This naturally unblocks your circulatory system. As you learn to draw in generous amounts of prana, you may consciously guide it into your body and let it suffuse every thirsty cell. Later as the pristine source takes over, you will slowly be drawn to the threshold of the mind. Recognize the breath as living spirit, that most subtle life-force which yogis call prana. Prana seeks to bond itself with corporeality and thereby engender stability of light. As your journey deepens, you may start to gain awareness of the archetypal myth of Goddess Psyche.

14. Physis, psyche and the matrikas

With regard to the myth of the Goddess Psyche, as abducted by the Jailers of Engineering Science (vis-à-vis Aristotle), it is interesting to note that in the ancient Greek language, words with the Greek root physis (e.g. physical) stem from the Ionian-Greek work physis, 'the spark of nature, the spark of life.' Might we start to see the true implications of physics? It initially evoked an inquiry into nature but later on configured the conception of psyche; at first the anthropomorphic "Goddess of Soul" but afterwards the actual soul itself with amorphic dream life extending beyond the

delimitating borders of the physical body. Still later this ethereal, all-suffusive factor "soul" was intensively masculinised and narrowly conceived as the intellectually plausible "mind." Around the same time came the theoretic "psyche," a relic of psychology. Correspondingly, physics has effectively succeeded in ousting nature from its antiseptic structures and descended to a contemptible form of intellectual mechanics.

By expedient cross-cultural contextualization it is useful to mention the appearance of matrikas in the Indian tradition of Yoga-tantra. Conceived as "Mother Goddesses of Knowledge," matrikas correspond to Goddess Psyche.²² Matrika is based on the Sanskrit word mata, meaning mother. Mata derives from the very remote Indo-European root maya, meaning at once both "illusion" and "creation." This morphemic root also forms the Latin root mens, "the measuring mind." But one mustn't be misled by mind versus matter – over what is termed "physical" and what is termed "spiritual" – as if antithetical points of contention.

There is no honest means of defending the notion of an absolute gulf between the world of matter (mater>maya>creation>illusion) and that of spirit – between reality and make-believe. When a person is found endeavouring to enact this otherwise impenetrable bipolar drama, "inside" versus "out," we clinically regard the native as psychotic, as one who projects his internal dreamscape out upon the world of objective verification, who turns his pockets inside out in attempt to impregnate sterile nature. Or perhaps we can glimpse the early intention of the Latin notion of reincarnation: to denude oneself of fraudulent personae, taking earth for shoes and sky for robe. And though the corresponding Greek term, metempsychosis, expresses the

²² Matrika (literally 'matrix, little mother'), is a female deity (śakti) that emanates power and guidance to yogins.

notion in a subtler way with its connotation of a spirit/soul/mind-function briefly disencumbered of its carnal frame, this is not to exalt outlandish states of mind, nor mental disorder, disease and distress—far from it. The chief aim of yoga is to quieten the mind: *yogash-citta-vritti-nirodha*.

To conclude these notes, I will simply add that according to the lore of Yoga-tantra, those Psyche-like goddesses known as *matrikas* are sure to gather close to the steadfast yogi who unwaveringly clings to the meditative solitudes.²³ Till then be content with breathing deeply; the tummy's rise as the air flows in—but it's better if I'm able to show you in person...

²³ See W. Y. Evans-Wentz, editor, *Tibet's Great Yogi Milarepa*, 1928.

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