

## **Yoga, Music, and Spiritual Practice: A Manifesto**

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My experience playing music for yoga has led to an understanding of their complementarity, although it requires that the understandings of both “music” and “yoga” be reconfigured from their popular conceptions. The dimension of spirituality in each is made possible by the subjective, pre-conceptual experience that a dedicated practice can cultivate. The cognitive mind provides substantive mapping of the natural world and social interaction, but simultaneously conceals a “being-in-the-world” awareness that is both crucial to emotional well-being and related to the mystery of creativity. There is a political dimension to this argument, in that cultural forces maintain the hegemony of objective knowledge and therefore occlude the means of discussing facets of awareness prior to cognition. Subjectivity is not reducible to generalizations, and therefore metaphors must be loose enough to accommodate the manifold nature of the subjective experience. Cognition-dominated culture seduces us with fixed conceptual musical forms, commodities that can have value. The phenomenon of music is largely withheld behind false assumptions of what “music” is. This can be remedied by teaching music as an inner phenomenon explored through dance, percussion and vocalization, rather than instrumental instruction.

Je joue de la musique d'accompagnement pour la pratique du yoga : cette expérience m'a permis de comprendre leur complémentarité. Cependant il faut que « la musique » et « le yoga » soient reconfigurés par rapport à la façon dont ces concepts sont communément conçus. L'un et l'autre ont une dimension de spiritualité rendue possible par l'expérience subjective, pré-

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conceptuelle, que peut cultiver une pratique dédiée. L'approche cognitive dresse une carte solide du monde naturel ainsi que des interactions sociales, mais elle met à l'arrière-plan la conscience d'« être-au-monde ». Celle-ci est pourtant cruciale pour notre bien-être émotionnel, tout en se rattachant au mystère de la créativité. La question a une dimension politique : en effet, en s'employant à maintenir en place l'hégémonie du savoir objectif, les forces culturelles bloquent la remise en question des différentes facettes de l'état de conscience avant même son accession à un stade cognitif. On ne peut pas réduire la subjectivité à des généralisations, c'est pourquoi les métaphores doivent rester flottantes, de façon à correspondre aux aspects multiples de l'expérience subjective. La culture qui est dominée par l'approche cognitive nous séduit en nous proposant des formes musicales et conceptuelles fixes, des commodités qui peuvent avoir de la valeur. Ainsi, le phénomène musical reste enfoui sous de fausses présomptions quant à ce qu'est « la musique ». On peut y remédier en enseignant la musique comme un phénomène intérieur, un phénomène à explorer par la danse, la percussion, la vocalisation – ce qui est préférable au choix d'un enseignement instrumental.

My calling is to play music for yoga. I understand it as a specific discipline, requiring the practice of yoga postures and the cultivation of an internal approach to music. Playing music and “doing yoga” are not immediately related, certainly not if one sees yoga as fitness gymnastics. I play the guzheng, a Chinese pentatonic harp, and improvise sound textures, melodies, and rhythms that follow the pace of the class.<sup>1</sup> In my life, this pursuit arrived as a collision of two activities I devoted significant time to, but otherwise thought of separately. In addition to meeting market demand, it satisfies a higher need by stimulating creative thought towards an original artistic practice.

Of course, the complex tradition of yoga broadly evolved from a mystic pursuit of spirituality, but mainstream yoga today embraces commodification, materialism, and objectified bodies.<sup>2</sup> Music, in our capitalist culture, is also treated as a commodity. This affects not only the distribution of music and compensation of artists, but the very way that music is conceived. The “song” or “piece” is taken for granted as the form, or worse, as music itself.

In my practice, I’ve come to understand music as an embodied mental phenomenon: the spontaneous pouring forth of sound-sensations, an activity of the mind apart from cognition, the raw sensuous material from which all compositions of music are hewn. Music itself is elemental like wood, and songs and compositions are like tables and chairs. The beauty of the forest is distinct from the beautiful products it provides. The forest is only available to subjective experience, while carpentry is accessible to the market of products.

<sup>1</sup>Matthew Wiviott, “Extension part 3,” *LiveYogaMusic.com EP*, <https://liveyogamusic.bandcamp.com/track/extension-part-3> (accessed March 20, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> See Carol Horton and Roseanne Harvey, eds., *21st Century Yoga: Culture, Politics and Practice* (Chicago: Kleio Books, 2012).

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I like to think I wander around that metaphorical forest when I play music.

As a listener, I still believe music is a psychosomatic phenomenon in which sounds are received to affect the body, which is to say, the emotional self. Not all songs on the radio do that, but when they do it's really music and the distinction is with us in the realm of feeling; our own mind functioning differently when we recognize sounds as carrying music. The mind-body connection is reflexively deepened; in other words, awareness of sensations in the body is heightened. The link between music and dance is primordial because music originates in the body as subjective states, and not in the mind/memory as compositions with objective form.

Given that commodity culture has traditionally valued objects above subjective experience, and perhaps even due to the devaluation of subjective experience in Western rationalism, the popular idea of music, it seems to me, intrinsically implies something fixed, or at least partially predetermined. Improvisation is a fringe ideal, generally associated with music that is avant-garde and unapproachable. As an ability, improvisation is something one might arrive at eventually, after achieving sufficient mastery of an instrument and repertoire. Inspiration to play music is often expressed as the desire to reproduce familiar compositions. What's neglected is the *natural musical impulse*, which demands a cultivation apart from the activity and appreciation of fixed musical works and the technical manipulation of an instrument.

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Yoga today is understood to be a physical practice, a cultivation of the body. In the classical yoga tradition one of the primary scriptures, still regarded as the main text of yogic philosophy, is Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*. The second line:

“Yoga is the cessation of the turnings of thought,” is often chanted in western classes in Sanskrit: “Yogah citta vritti nirodhah.” The basis of yoga practice is psychological to the extent that it deals with mastery of consciousness.<sup>3</sup> The body is an instrument, a medium, through which the experience of yoga is encountered.

I practised yoga for many years before being exposed to its traditional teachings, but during that time the physical practice impacted my life. I began to see emotions dwelling in my body, and recognizing this gave me greater influence over my emotional state. I became aware of my emotional life manifesting as subtle sensations experienced in my limbs and core. Emotionality is a continuous fluctuating presence, and therefore the body is in constant communion with the mind. Our inherited vocabulary separates “mind” and “body” without adequately recognizing the indivisible overlap. Similarly, we speak of “happy” and “sad” as distinct states, but rarely observe the continuity of emotions, the sense in which bodies are constantly providing feedback about interior life.

Interior life is sensual, embodied, and emotional—or rather there is no distinction between sensation, embodiment, and emotions in pre-conceptual awareness. That is a lesson I took away from my academic study of phenomenology, but validated through my yoga practice. The emphasis on “presence” and “the now” in new-age discourse, I believe addresses this facet of consciousness that evades objective knowledge. Quantification, a prime criterion of objective knowledge, requires some enduring objective presence, but the state of subjective presence is purely ephemeral because it is ever-changing. To recognize continuity requires cognition and the abstraction of

<sup>3</sup> See Matthew Remski, *Threads of Yoga: A Remix of Patanjali-s Sutra-s, with commentary and reverie*, <https://www.createspace.com/4025432>, 2012 (accessed March 20, 2015).

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concepts. Besides that, I believe subjective presence is fundamentally singular, in the sense that it is radically private and exclusive to each one of us. That is the source of our value as individuals as opposed to the ego (Sanskrit: *asmita* or *ahankara*), and also the source of our existential loneliness.<sup>4</sup> To overcome our given isolation requires the artifice of culture: language, concepts, media of expression, and likely a given world already imbued with culture.

To speak of subjective presence requires the disclaimer that I have no reason to think my impressions are true as I understand truth, and so they don't necessarily apply to anyone else except as an explanation of the beliefs that ground my artistic practice. This caveat is an important and illuminating difficulty. Lacking an objective assertion of truth, there is no basis for conviction in the same way that science offers conviction. "Truth" has acquired the meaning of objective fact, and therefore it offers nothing but confusion with regard to interior subjective life or, you could say, spiritual life. There is a popular equation of spirituality with "the search for truth," but this is wrong and even misleading. Rather, I see it as the search for that elusive facet of life for which "truth" does not even apply.

One could try to make a distinction between "deep truths" and "scientific truths," but the bias of objectivity ensures that the former would be based upon our understanding of the latter. The difference between objective truth and subjective "truth" is not accounted for. Scientific truths establish facts we can know about our shared world; deep truths, the quarry of spiritual pursuit, arrive from a cultivated awareness and can never be "known," in the lasting

<sup>4</sup> As Michael Stone in *The Inner Tradition of Yoga* (Boston: Shambala, 2008) writes: "*Asmita*, the experience of an 'I, me, and mine' comes from a mechanism in the mind called the *ahankara*" (68). Although I find the term "mechanism" to be problematic, we require metaphors for mental processes and technology provides the models.

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and durable form that is “knowledge.” Deep truths are only encountered as experience. There is no knowledge gained, only inspiration and vitality.

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The music I make is devoted to improvisation. It has been my practice for nearly twenty years. All of the time I spend making music, when I could be writing songs or practicing compositions, is spent tuning in to my present awareness and expressing the music I feel manifesting in my body at that very moment. It is something I’ve cultivated since my early teens, at the expense of any conventional musical ambition. When I discovered accompaniment for yoga five years ago, I realized that my stubborn approach to music, which left me unsuitable for any of the music industries, was particularly suited to the yoga class. The class itself defines the temporal limits of the music: the length of sections, when to change, when to return to a familiar sonic cue. These limits are determined in real time by the instructor who may have a class plan but is likely revising it in response to the needs of the participants. Sensations are shared with the class and myself as musician in an empathic relationship; my familiarity with the practice allows me to recall a certain meridian being elongated in the body, for example, or the introspective plunge of a forward fold. That input feeds the music from the bottom up.

I believe the music in a yoga class should be present in the same way that the yoga practice is meant to cultivate presence. Musical composition and recording undeniably have tremendous value and importance, but they lack something as well; something that only exists when music is literally being created. The most famous aphorism of Marshall McLuhan, “the medium is the message,” says exactly that. When the medium is recorded sounds, the

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message is that of absence. The sounds come from somewhere else, at some time in the past; not here, not now. When performing rehearsed music, there can be a strong element of presence, but it is often marginalized in favour of re-creation. Masterful musicians maintain presence as they play preconceived pieces, but only improvisation constantly maximizes presence.

What is the value of presence? I'll cautiously sidestep the contemporary mystic Eckhart Tolle, whose bestseller is *The Power of Now* (1997), and refer instead to the work of psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. His contribution to the emerging field of positive psychology has been the recognition and study of the "state of flow."<sup>5</sup> When artists and athletes are performing at their best, they widely report entering the "flow" state, in which they experience themselves almost as spectators, much differently than they experience themselves in ordinary task-driven life. My interpretation is that cognition becomes muted and awareness resides in a pre-conceptual mode, the very same goal of meditation or mindfulness practice. The experience and cultivation of this state, according to Csikszentmihalyi's research, correlates closely with general happiness.

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In conversation, I feel shy about using the word "spirituality"; it is so often loaded with baggage and pretension. Does it presuppose a "spirit"? Some transcendent entity that will continue to exist when we die, that we work to encounter? Given my immersion in western thought and the Nietzschean collapse of metaphysics, I don't hold a place for a spirit or soul that exists

<sup>5</sup> See Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: the Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990).

outside the confines of my worldly body.

Yoga, as a Vedic tradition, does endorse reincarnation, and therefore an immortal soul. My personal experience with yoga has given no credence to mysticism, although I know that for many others it does. I tend to relegate the idea of “spirit” to the awareness born of the mind-body overlap, rather than an objective entity that completes the triumvirate of mind-body-spirit. It is akin to my emotional life.

Even with a mundane experience of spirit, I still encounter the mystery and connection that spirituality traditionally implies. The act of witnessing patterns played out upon the mind-body is analogous to an appreciation of nature, just as the natural world is wondrous and awe-inspiring. There is something incomprehensible and profound in a forest. It exudes magic in its abundance and interwoven diversity. There is a sense of overarching harmony in a forest, unifying the totality in an unknowable way. This is what I think of as the Creator. I would personally avoid the term God since, as a concept, it carries the same bias of objective truth. As far as I’m concerned, God does not belong anywhere in the realm of objective knowledge; only as fleeting sensation. The idea of existence simply does not apply.

I interpret the connection between creativity and the Creator thusly: the metaphorical forest in my mind/ body does not come from me; certainly not the “me” of my ego. Creativity is separate and prior to cognition. The processes of cognition result from self-direction, the free will exerting itself. I tend to speculate that a critical threshold of complexity is breached by the most recent evolutionary layers of cerebral activity and free will manifests, along with invaluable capacities: knowledge acquisition and civilizing culture. But self-determining cognition also comes at a cost, and that is attunement to a facet of life existing exclusively in subjectivity: the subtle background hum

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of Nature that the cognitive mind reflexively works to drown out. A spiritual practice is an activity that works to silence the cognitive mind so that a deeper layer of embodied awareness can take over. Giving up the cognitive mind is akin to giving up self-determining free will, ironically leading to a sense of liberation. The great difficulty of a spiritual practice is that the cognitive mind does not hand over the reins without opposition.

Of course the above explanation of spiritual practice and creativity is contingent and incomplete. It is almost paradoxical to speculate about pre-conceptual awareness when concepts are the tools of speculation. It is also contradictory to speak generally about something that I've already defined as exclusive to the subject. Language, concepts, and culture enable shared understandings and social behaviour, but fail at recognizing the dimension of human experience that simply cannot be shared without artifice and mediation and that is precisely the realm of spirituality.

My hypothetical relation within the mind of a part that exerts self-direction and parts that are governed by natural determination surely lacks objective validity. Nonetheless, it corresponds to my experience of the complexity of mental life and more-or-less conforms to an objective understanding of psychology and quantum physics that I have gleaned from intellectual culture.<sup>6</sup> Creativity remains a mystery at large, even though it is celebrated as the fruit of the mind. The history of creativity, it seems to me, is bound up with the history of spiritual pursuit, from the Egyptian pyramids to Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* (1819-1823). Although I broadly tend to align myself with secular humanism, both music and yoga seem to offer a taste of the same mystery that has inspired mystics and believers.

<sup>6</sup> See David Bohm, *The Undivided Universe: An Ontological Interpretation of Quantum Theory*, trans. Basil J. Hiley (New York: Routledge, 1993).

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I believe creativity arrives from an awareness of Nature manifesting in my primitive mind, and then interpreted by my culturally-embedded conceptual mind.<sup>7</sup> It does not come from me, but I can appropriate it, transform it into physical gestures that impact the strings of an instrument; and in some confounding way I share it with the forest and all of creation. Yet it does come from my being, in the same way that the growth of a tree comes from processes contained within and executed by the tree itself. When I experience a forest, I can't help but believe that a unifying force is active and online. The sun is a good candidate, and indeed the sun has been worshipped. The yoga practice often begins with a salutation to it.

The unifying force is the Creator or Nature; those are just metaphors for a subjective state, but they suggest the relation with creativity and the natural world. Of course it is not the sun, because the sun is actually just another thing participating in the unifying force. I claim that it can be encountered in the mind-body when the apparatus of concepts and knowledge is suspended, and the flow of emotional life is perceived as sensation. That is not an original claim; that is more-or-less what the tradition of yoga teaches.

Obviously I'm privileged to be able to interpret my inner musical experience as a metaphorical forest. I gather that not everyone can close their eyes and conjure music immediately in their body. I can, and I'm not saying that to boast, but because I feel that it is not even something valued. If it was valued, then music lessons would always begin with dance, percussion, and vocalization, and in that way seek to cultivate inner musicality. Instruments

<sup>7</sup> As Wassily Kandinsky observes in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. M.T.H. Sadler (New York: Dover, 1977): "An example of this today is our sympathy, our spiritual relationship, with the Primitives. Like ourselves, these artists sought to express in their work only internal truths, renouncing in consequence all consideration of external forms" (23). "Primitive mind" could be replaced with "archaic mind" to marginally destigmatize the concept.

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would never be taught, rather, the cultivation of inner musicality would lead others to figure out how to express their music through a medium. If instruments were too difficult to figure out, we would make them easier. That can happen with the development of digital interfaces, but only if we collectively decide that it is important. Auto-tuning does not have to be an elitist production tool, but could be a means of improving the accessibility of musical creation. As it is, the stigmas associated with objectified music leave far too many people feeling inadequate. The creation of music is left to a privileged few, in the reclusion of recording studios. We are conditioned to dismiss, to condescend to even mediocre musical performers. How are we to respond to the mediocre musicians in ourselves?

I am given hope by the resurgence of interest in the practice of yoga. I think music needs to be torn away from elite production and considered as a wellness activity. By the end of the nineteenth century, hatha yoga was the possession of austere mendicants, but it underwent a transformation in the very way it was understood and has become widely accessible.<sup>8</sup> Music, today, requires a similar transformation of understanding. In its formative state, music is not sound but fields of sensual experience. The mediation of this embodied phenomenon has traditionally been known as “playing music.” More commonly, today, music is played by way of a technological apparatus without the benefit of an emotional life but with the uncanny ability to reproduce an object of music. For listeners, the music played from a recording returns to subjective awareness, where it can affect emotion and sensation. But when it spontaneously emerges with the ineffable quality of presence, it can offer a pleasure that quite literally affirms life.

<sup>8</sup> See Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

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