

ILARIA BONCORI    TRACEY LOUGHRAN

# HEALTH AND WELLBEING

*The University of Essex Reader*

foreword

*Anthony Forster*

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# 1. What the practice of yoga can do for academic practice: personal reflections

*Martyna Śliwa*

## **Introduction**

“This is the beauty of it: there is no point in thinking that you’re great just because you can do a certain pose as there is always somewhere else to go, a more advanced option to work towards”. It is Sunday morning and there are about 20 of us in the gymnasium of a primary school that makes its space available for fitness and yoga classes in the evenings and on the weekends. Our yoga teacher has been giving instructions for getting into *bakasana* – crow pose – and we are all trying to get into and to hold this seemingly gravity-defying pose, even if only for a second or two. One participant has actually mastered it and perhaps is ready for the next step now: jumping back, or – to use a more elegant, yoga-appropriate expression – floating, from crow to *chaturanga*, low plank. Indeed, there is always somewhere else to go.

Crow, sometimes also referred to as crane, is an arm-balancing posture which provides foundation for most other arm balances in yoga. It might be the first arm balance typically learned by those practising yoga but as far as I am concerned, it is certainly hard enough: one requires a good deal of core strength, balance and concentration to do it. The determination to overcome fear is also needed because of the quite realistic prospect of falling down, face-first. But it promises to be worth it: in addition to its physical benefits, such as strengthening and toning a vari-

ety of muscles, the crow pose is supposed to build confidence, relieve stress and anxiety, increase concentration and enable creativity in the practitioner. Precisely what I need! And therefore, just like everybody else in the room, I am giving this arm balance a go, hoping to get there without face-planting.

Over the years, participating in yoga classes has become essential to maintaining my health and wellbeing, and has been an activity that has accompanied and inspired me throughout my professional career. In fact, the first yoga session I ever attended took place on the premises of the sports centre of the university where I held my first lectureship position. These days, at the beginning of each teaching term, after I fill my diary with a schedule of meetings and lectures for the coming months, I make sure to add yoga classes to it as well, two to three times each week. Whenever I visit other cities for a certain period of time – for example, to collaborate with colleagues from other universities on a piece of research – I try to join a local yoga studio, even if only for a couple of weeks at a time. While I have not become either acrobatic or serene, over time, I have come to believe that yoga offers a form of exercise that is perfect for supporting me, in many different ways, in my professional and personal work and growth, and is essential to my sense of wellbeing. This essay provides an opportunity to share some of my experiences of practising yoga and benefiting from it in all aspects of my professional life. While my scholarly expertise is not directly related to yoga, throughout the text I refer to academic research as well as blogs that have addressed the effects of yoga practice on health and wellbeing.

Viewed holistically, yoga encompasses a broad philosophy known as the eight-fold path – or the eight limbs of yoga – outlined in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras and including: attitudes toward others/restraints (*yamas*), rituals/self-observances (*niyamas*), the physical practice of postures (*asana*), breathing practice (*pranayama*), withdrawal of the senses (*pratyahara*), concentra-

tion (*dharana*), meditation (*dhyana*), and state of enlightenment (*samadhi*) (Iyengar, 1979). The practice of yoga is expected to promote health in a holistic sense, through the balancing of physical, spiritual, psychological, and social aspects (Engebretson, 2002). In the Western context, the term 'yoga' is typically used with reference to physical exercise (*asana*), and to a lesser extent with regard to breathing techniques (*pranayama*) and meditation (*dyana*) (Garfinkel and Schumacher, 2000). While there is an emphasis on the physical exercise element, yoga is generally understood to be a mind-body practice, whereby the physiological state is considered to "affect the emotions, thoughts, and attitudes" and there is an underlying assumption that "the mental state has an effect on the body" (Cowen and Adams, 2005: 212).

Below I discuss five specific areas where yoga practice has proven to be of great help to me, supporting me in my development and in maintaining my physical and mental health: academic writing, relating to others, pedagogic practice, living and working without physical pain, and dealing with stress and anxiety.

### **Yoga and writing**

The development of awareness of the inseparability of the body from the mind was one of the first lessons I gained from practising yoga. Surprisingly at first, reflections associated with this observation transferred into how I began to view and relate to the academic writing process. As anyone who has tried to practise yoga will have noted, the ability to do a particular yoga pose is about much more than a strong and supple body. In yoga classes, the teacher would point out countless times: "if your mind is distracted, you will struggle to hold a pose". Likewise, countless times I have been unable to ignore the fact that when the mind is "all over the place", this will be reflected in the

body's struggle to get into and hold a particular *asana*, or to transition smoothly from one pose to another. From there, another observation followed, this time in relation to my academic writing practice: with a distracted mind, it is impossible for writing to flow. The practice of looking at the screen of the laptop, pressing keys in a particular order, reading words as they emerge – letter by letter – and become parts of sentences, then eventually form full sentences in front of my eyes, is an embodied practice that requires patience, time, skill, confidence and a great deal of concentration. In this regard, trying to write resembles trying to do yoga. Except, in the case of yoga, falling out of the pose when one loses concentration is immediately obvious. With writing, by contrast, one can spend a long time looking at the screen and even pressing the letter keys, before realising that not much has been happening because the mind has been distracted.

Perhaps this does not happen to everybody but is certainly true about me, since this has been, more than once, my experience of writing. It used to frustrate me greatly. Crafting a text takes me a long time. There are moments when I think I must be the slowest writer in the world. It seems like a drawn-out process even when I am able to maintain concentration quite well, let alone when the mind wanders in multiple directions, undermining the intention to reach whatever “writing objective” I set for myself on a given day. From frustration would come negative self-judgement, irritation, and overall, a feeling of wasted – and unpleasantly spent – time.

When one practises yoga in a class context, there is usually a teacher around who will say: “it's ok to wobble out of a pose. Approach this with lightness and a sense of fun. So what if you can't do it today? All you're doing is trying to stand on one leg, it's no biggy if you can't do it. Be joyful about it! Use your *bandhas* – energy locks, and *drishti* – a focused gaze, to support you. And try again”. With the help of various yoga teachers, I have gradually realised that there is nothing wrong with the “wob-

bling out". Nothing wrong with the slowness, either. In addition, trying again – the repetitiveness of getting into and holding *asanas* – allows for developing greater bodily awareness and for deepening the practice. In fact, neither slowness nor repetitiveness are unpleasant experiences. The only obstacle, really, lies in the feeling of frustration and negative self-judgement that accompany our attempts at getting on with working on the yoga sequence – and it is wonderful to be able to rely on a teacher who will remind us about it.

I completely agree with Wenger (2015: 3) when she admits: "I can no longer think of writing and yoga as separate processes". I am full of gratitude and appreciation for what doing yoga has done for my writing – especially, for how learning to embrace the slowness and repetitiveness of yoga practice has helped me approach my writing practice differently, strengthening my sense of wellbeing along the way. It required, though, replacing the frustrated voice of my inner critic: "you're way too slow", "this is banal and trivial", "you're never going to finish this text" – with the wise voice of a compassionate teacher: "you are doing your best", "it's normal for focus to come and go, it's good that you have noticed it, take a deep breath and try again", "trust the process"...

It also required giving up on my assumptions about what my writing practice "should be" like – for example, immersive, confident, efficient – and on the misguided belief that it is a skill that can be acquired once and for good, and then it will be always available and ready for me to "switch it on" at any time. There are times when writing unfolds smoothly and pleasantly, and other times when it feels like ploughing through frozen soil. But now I know that there is nothing wrong with the slow assembling of sentences. There is nothing wrong with reworking the same sub-section of a text again and again, modifying it, ever so slightly, each time. The practice of yoga has allowed me to feel through my own body-mind how beneficial repetitiveness is, the



process of going through the same sequence of exercises time and time again, introducing only very minor changes. As a result of practising yoga, the body gradually becomes more supple and stronger over a period of time, but even more obvious is the difference in how it feels to be in the body at the end of the class compared to the beginning. Likewise, by the end of a day of writing, the text and the knowledge it constructs and conveys will have moved forward: on the screen and within the body-mind.

### **Yoga and encountering difference**

It is necessary to acknowledge the common critiques of the commercialised dimension of yoga, such as Delaney's (2017) point about the "narcissistic" aspect of the yoga enterprise, or Warner's (2011: n.p.) worry that many young women choose to practise yoga since, for them, "there is no sense that personal liberation can be found by taking a more active role in the public world". No doubt, the image of an affluent Western yoga practitioner, whose "yogic lifestyle" revolves around a particular type of conspicuous consumption – Lululemon or Sweaty Betty apparel, overpriced cold-pressed organic juices, and all-inclusive yoga and detox "retreats" in five star surroundings – evokes connotations of self-centredness and superficiality rather than an openness to others and self-reflection. Notwithstanding the problematic consequences of the operations of the yoga industry and of an unquestioning subjection to its profit-generating logic, the reality of who we encounter when participating in yoga classes is, from my experience, very different from what marketing images would have us believe.

The classes I attend in my neighbourhood are populated by bodies of different shapes, ethnicities, genders and ages, predominantly in their forties and fifties. Some of us go regularly, others pop in from time to time, yet others come to class once

and are not seen again. For each *asana*, the teacher suggests several “options” – levels of difficulty – and so for everybody, there is effort involved. Sometimes my body feels clumsy on the mat, sometimes less so. Sometimes the body of the person next to me looks clumsy, finding it hard to bend and stretch as instructed. We are all physically close to each other, sweating, breathing loudly, trying to concentrate, getting distracted, working out the direction in which our shoulders, hips and toes should be turned. The teacher will remind us to “find our edge”, to challenge ourselves without hurting or straining ourselves.

Practising yoga poses in the company of other people supports the development of a relational, embodied perspective on self and others. Over time, a sense of togetherness emerges, even though we do not speak to each other during the class. An awareness of one’s own body as well as the presence of other people’s bodies deepens, and with it comes a greater gentleness and acceptance of self and others. We are together, although each of us faces different challenges and our bodies are not moving in harmony with each other. This does not matter, however. The co-presence of a group of strangers – all working hard, all doing the best they can in a given moment – feels supportive and reassuring.

The experience of collective yoga practice – working with my body and sensing others’ bodies around me – has made me more aware of and reflexive about my own prejudices, biases and stereotypes projected onto others. As an organisation studies scholar, but also as someone who often finds herself in the position of being a member of a minority group – a woman, a professor, a foreigner, a Central European, a non-Anglophone native speaker – I feel strongly about the need to make our organisations and society places free from prejudice and discrimination. For a long time, I was conscious of the significance of “difference” and its impact on how we relate to each other. However, until I started to become aware of the biases that surfaced

in me during yoga classes, I had not seriously reflected on the judgements I make about others; judgements that emerge even before words are exchanged. The proximity to others' bodies that is afforded in a yoga class setting can become a powerful source of knowledge. When we tune into what our body-mind tells us, we realise that it communicates the feelings we carry within ourselves and project onto others. From this point, compassion can develop: towards the yoga co-practitioners, colleagues, students and strangers. The grip of judgement becomes looser, a sense of wellbeing increases.

### **Yoga and pedagogic practice**

“Well done, guys. Beautiful practice this morning” says our yoga teacher at the end of the class, and regardless of the clumsiness and difficulties we experienced over the past hour, we feel better about ourselves and are grateful to her for guiding us through the *asana* practice. From each yoga teacher I have encountered – be it in Newcastle, Brisbane, Colchester, Kraków, Copenhagen, Auckland or London – I have learned and continue to learn not only about yoga but also about being a teacher. The yoga teachers I have met have been calm, reflective, non-judgmental, encouraging and compassionate. Many times I have observed, in admiration, a yoga teacher's ability to gently connect to the emotional landscape of the participants, to acknowledge their apprehensions and insecurities, and then to tap into their potential to become more present on the mat, to find and explore their “edge”, and even to do something unimagined and extraordinary – like a headstand!

Teaching yoga is linked to a particular ethos of self-care, looking after one's health and wellbeing, showing commitment to the practice, and in many cases trying to follow a lifestyle that also draws on the tradition of the remaining seven “limbs

of yoga”, not only the physical *asana* practice. In addition to being influenced by the ethical-spiritual dimensions of yoga, yoga teachers are also subject to the demands of the “gig economy”. They are paid per hour and their work tends to be scheduled outside the “standard” working hours as clients are usually available for yoga classes either before or after day-time work. It is not uncommon for classes to take place at 6am or at 9pm; it is not uncommon for these classes to be delivered by the same person. Since their main “tool” is their own body, the risk of injury or even a seemingly minor illness such as a cold adds to the precarity of yoga teachers’ position – not being in good physical form means not being able to teach; every class that is not taught is lost income. Perhaps as a result of both an individual commitment to the ethos of yoga and due to the challenging working conditions in this occupation, those who choose to become yoga teachers are usually genuinely passionate about what they do and follow a calling to share the benefits of yoga with others. The yoga community popularises a certain ideal of a yoga teacher, for example through lists such as “10 Qualities of an Amazing Yoga Teacher” which include:

1. They connect with everyone in the class;
2. They have a way with words;
3. They leave their ego at the door;
4. They love (and respect) yoga;
5. They let their authentic personality shine through;
6. They are prepared;
7. They cater to all levels;
8. They share their knowledge;
9. They gain trust;
10. They share their light. (Coventry, 2019: n.p.)

It has been 20 years since I first started teaching in the higher education context and I would like to think that I am continu-

ing to develop as a university teacher and supervisor. If there has been, indeed, a positive development in my pedagogic practice, it has been possible to a large extent thanks to my own yoga practice and thanks to the vicarious learning of the teaching practice of my yoga teachers. There is an atmosphere of warmth and positivity that usually fills yoga classes. The messages that come from yoga teachers are encouraging and affirmative: “Well done! Good work! Beautiful!”. The teacher motivates the students to work hard enough to get to a point in their practice beyond which additional effort would be excessive. At the same time, students receive advice to become aware of their own boundaries and to be in touch with what they are capable of doing on a given day, so that when someone feels that they might injure themselves if they try any harder, they can take a break at any time and rest for a few breaths. Above all, good yoga teachers create a safe space for students to practise for themselves, not to impress the teacher and not to compete with others, and to enjoy the learning process.

My experience of observing – and being on the receiving end of – yoga teachers’ “craft” over the years has inspired me to try to follow a similar approach in my own university teaching and supervision. It is not easy to teach with passion and compassion, to connect with and include all students, to encourage them, to make them feel that it is safe and fun to open up to something new and challenging, and to explore and reflect on oneself and on learning. Nevertheless, it is a worthwhile aspiration to pursue, and I am grateful to my yoga teachers for showing me through their pedagogic practice that this is possible.

### **Yoga and physical health**

I developed the unhealthy habit of spending many hours, nearly every day, in a sitting position, many years ago – and

have persisted with it ever since. When I was much younger, sitting at a desk used to fill the major part of the day at school, and then it extended over additional hours of sitting at another desk at home, doing homework. As an undergraduate, this pattern continued: sitting in a lecture theatre, then back home in front of a computer screen, preparing coursework and revising for exams. Before I was 20, I would find it normal that during an intensive study time, I was walking around with a stiff neck and shoulders, and once or twice a year the pain caused by a “spasm” in the neck would almost immobilise me for a few days. Many people around me – often my fellow students and later on fellow lecturers – suffered from similar problems: one person would complain about a discomfort in the hips, someone else about a painful lower back, yet another person about an overall sense of stiffness around the spine that felt like something might “snap” if they try to turn in the “wrong” direction or too fast. From what I recall, in my late twenties I thought that a pain-free life experienced through a tension-free body was something only children could be lucky enough to enjoy, that getting older would inevitably involve getting stiffer and less mobile, and that there was nothing that could be done about it.

And yet, a sense of hope managed to surface from underneath those self-defeating – and possibly self-fulfilling – beliefs. I turned up at my first yoga class, driven by the wish to get rid of back and neck pain, and perhaps even to prevent another immobilising “spasm”, and relying on ibuprofen and a physiotherapist’s skills to bring me back to form. Alleviating stiffness in the body was a benefit of yoga practice which I experienced very quickly, and which got me “hooked” in the first place.

Even now, the power of yoga to counter back and neck pain remains my opening gambit when I encounter a not-yet-convert who is willing to listen and embark on praising the wonders of yoga. I can wholeheartedly recommend it, even if only for this pain-relief reason, to everybody. Most of us in academia – re-

ardless of whether we are a student or a university employee – tend to spend a lot of time during the working day in the sitting position. As one yoga teacher explains in her blog:

*They say that sitting is the new smoking because of all the negative impacts of a sedentary lifestyle. Sitting at a desk or computer all day takes a toll on more than just your eyes. It affects your posture, metabolism, risk of anxiety or depression and can lead to obesity, just to name a few... Bad posture can lead to serious issues like back pain, cardiovascular issues, digestion issues, and eventually changing of the curve of the spine itself, which will create a whole new level of back pain. (Mason, 2017: n.p.)*

Fortunately, she also adds: “Yoga is a fantastic way to combat the negative effects of sitting at a desk all day and other things that contribute to bad posture” (ibid.).

That yoga brings about a range of benefits for physical health should not be surprising, bearing in mind that yoga is part of Ayurveda, a traditional Indian medical system (Birch, 1995). The popularity of different varieties of physical yoga has triggered studies investigating its effect on the body, especially with regard to the treatment of musculoskeletal issues. For example, in people suffering from chronic neck pain, significant reductions in pain levels were reported following at least nine weeks of weekly yoga practice (e.g. Nambi *et al.*, 2015; Wattamwar and Nadkarni, 2012; Williams *et al.*, 2009). Other research findings addressing the benefits of yoga for the musculoskeletal system have included improved strength, flexibility, balance and posture (e.g. Sarosky *et al.*, 2008; Tekur *et al.*, 2010). Apparently, after a minimum of four weeks of yoga practice once a week, significant reductions in back pain have been reported, whereas consistent yoga practice for a period of between six and 12 months has been reported to result in sustained improvement in back pain (Tilbrook *et al.*, 2011). It certainly works for me, and nowadays it feels liberating to be able to go about my day without pain in my neck and shoulders. But as far as my health is concerned, there is



much more I owe to yoga, thanks to the effect it has had on my mental health and wellbeing.

### **Yoga and anxiety**

The word “yoga” denotes “union” or “unification”; this notion of a union refers to the inseparability of body and mind. The objective of yoga is to achieve a state of body-mind integration and to maintain all aspects of the body-mind in good health. By contrast, the etymology of words such as “anxiety” and “worry” points to the opposite state. “Anxiety” derives from the Latin word *angere, anguere* which means “to choke”, “to squeeze”, and is akin to the ancient Greek word *ankho*, which means “to constrict the throat”, “to strangle”. The root of the verb “worry” has a similar meaning. Its origin can be traced back to the Middle English word *wirien*, meaning “to slay, kill or injure by biting and shaking the throat” and to the Old English *wyrgan*, “to strangle”. Anxiety and worry, then, describe a state in which we feel metaphorically “strangled” – and so have our head, which we typically consider to be the “location” of the mind, cut off from the body. Put differently, anxiety and worry are the reverse of the yogic ideal of body-mind integration.

While the images of yogi(ni)s promoted by yoga bloggers, yoga teachers’ websites and the marketers of yoga-related products convey serenity and calmness, there is also a plethora of research that demonstrates the effectiveness of yoga as an antidote to anxiety, worry and other mental health-related problems that are common in the 21<sup>st</sup> century western world. For example, a study by Taherkhani *et al.* (2003) showed beneficial effects of yoga on individuals with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). Other researchers have demonstrated significant improvements in individuals with anxiety and depression, after a period – sometimes as short as two months – of practising



yoga (e.g. Gupta *et al.* 2006; Javnbakht *et al.*, 2009; Khalsa, 2004; Michalsen *et al.*, 2006; Pilkington *et al.*, 2005; Woolery *et al.* 2004).

Yoga has been shown to help in reducing anger, decreasing verbal aggression, improving sleep, decreasing the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and improving mood. One of the physiological effects of yoga is an increased heart variability (HRV) which, in turn, helps calm the autonomous nervous system and regulate emotions. As Hutchinson (2019: n.p.) explains:

*Decreased HRV is correlated with negative affective states such as anxiety, stress, PTSD, and anger. Individuals who suffer with depression, anxiety, flashbacks, and angry outbursts often have trouble regulating their emotions. People who have poorly regulated autonomic nervous systems can be thrown off balance easily both on a mental and physical level. Examples include being 'set off' by a minor hassle, road rage, or crying in public when it isn't warranted. By practicing activities that increase your HRV—like yoga—you can help retrain your heart and physiology, which can lead to emotion regulation and a calmer state.*

The feeling of being strangled by an overwhelming sense of anxiety, where the mind races and the body seems to lack a solid base from which to slow down the thoughts of worry and fear is very familiar to me. But so is the feeling of the floor underneath my feet, grounding and supporting me, and the feeling of connection between breath and movement as the body-mind calms down and transitions from one *asana* to the next. Yoga practice has taught me that this calm state is not only achievable but normal; it is a natural state to which it is possible to return and to overcome anxiety and worry.

Stress always accompanies life and we need to be able to develop ways of dealing with the negative consequences of its excess. Working in higher education has its own, non-trivial stresses: we work with and for other people, we differ in opinion and in personality, we have our own ambitions to meet as well as

objectives that others set for us. There are always new tasks to accomplish and diverse pressures to meet, and with all this, we do not know what the future brings for our universities. Of course, structural change, rather than yoga, is necessary to address the causes of a lot of the anxiety and worry that feature in the professional lives of university employees and students in Brexit Britain. Nevertheless, yoga practice can be an important aspect of our self-care, of looking after our body-minds and helping them stay well regardless of external circumstances.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have reflected on the personal experience of the influence of practising yoga on my professional life as an academic. In particular, I have discussed how yoga practice has supported me and facilitated my development in five areas: academic writing, relating to others, pedagogic practice, living and working without physical pain, and dealing with stress and anxiety. Since I have found yoga highly beneficial to all aspects of my professional practice, I would like to encourage my colleagues and students to undertake yoga practice – especially if, upon reading this chapter, they think it might also support them.

Obviously, I am aware of the criticisms directed at yoga that refer to its “dark sides”, for example those associated with the potential for encountering teachers who behave inappropriately towards students or with the problematic nature of commercialisation of the “yogic lifestyle” and its individualising, consumerism-oriented effects. I recognise that not everybody will have had the same positive experience of encountering yoga as I have. I would like to emphasise that I have written this chapter solely on the basis of the – often surprising – benefits of yoga which I have observed in my case over an extended period of

time. My experience of yoga and how it has helped me live the life of an academic has led me to enthusiastically affirm the benefits of yoga practice, and I strongly believe that yoga provides a very helpful way of approaching our professional practice from a body-mind perspective.

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