



# Learning to feel: on practice and precarity in an Amsterdam yoga studio

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## Abstract

This article articulates the practice of learning to feel taught in an Amsterdam yoga studio. Tattva Yoga constitutes one localized manifestation of postural yoga practices flourishing within neoliberal systems worldwide. As a scene of adjustment (Berlant, in *Cruel optimism*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2011) to conditions of precarity which shape the everyday lives of participants, Tattva Yoga encourages students to cultivate feelings of flexibility, openness, and balance. A close reading of Tattva Yoga practices identifies a performative logic to feeling, through which embodied action constitutes a form of subject cultivation. The case study, thus, offers an exploration of feeling as the intersection of body, subject, affect, and discourse, and as one means through which individuals enact subjectivities both continuous with and alternate to the demands of precarity.

**Keywords** Yoga · Body · Affect · Feeling · Precarity

## Introduction

“Yoga is learning to feel,” says Olaf, stepping among the mats as he crosses from one side of the room to another to adjust the music. It is late winter in Amsterdam. Weak sunshine filters into the yoga studio, refracted through the colourful panelling over the ceiling skylights. Nina Simone’s rendition of “Here Comes the Sun” fills the room whose walls are covered with portraits of Hindu deities, Indian saints, and favourite personalities including David Bowie and Prince. The students in the class, mostly women, mostly white, all fit and able bodied, range in age from mid 20s to mid 50s. They are sweaty from vigorous exercise. Now sitting on the floor, they reach forwards to touch toes with

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fingertips. “I don’t care how far forward you are,” says Olaf. “Ask yourself, what am I pushing for? You don’t need it. Learn to feel your limits. Deepening isn’t forcing the body. Deepen the breath. Deepen the love.”

Despite the home-grown atmosphere of Tattva Yoga (pseudonym), the scene of Olaf’s instruction is a recognizable iteration of many yoga classes currently taught in Amsterdam, in Europe, and globally. Since its inception in 1999 Tattva Yoga has maintained a dedicated student base, offering classes intertwining an atmosphere of urban cool with vigorous physical exercise, religious symbolism, and ethical-spiritual teachings. Owners Olaf and Robert (pseudonyms) lead classes which instruct physical postures in choreographed sequences alongside techniques of breath control, seated meditation, devotional chanting, and the discussion of yoga philosophy. Despite offering a strong fitness programme, Tattva Yoga classes frame physical exercise within a project of personal transformation and spiritual liberation—an objective which, Tattva Yoga teachers state, distinguishes yoga from mere gymnastics.

In their transformational promise, Tattva Yoga practices are consistent with a renewed surge in the popularity of yoga in the late twentieth century, particularly in the anglophone global North (De Michelis 2004; Godrej 2017; Jain 2015; Newcombe 2019; Singleton 2010; Syman 2010).<sup>1</sup> Orientalizing accounts limited interpretations of yoga to binaries of (non-)authenticity in relation to practices imagined as timeless and universal (O’Brien-Kop and Newcombe 2021, p. 5). However recent yoga studies scholarship explores how contemporary yoga forms enact “complex and recursive relationships with ‘traditional’ yoga”, including transformations under globalization and modernization (Mallinson and Singleton 2017, p. xxi; see also Singleton 2013, p. 54).

Elements of contemporary popular yoga forms find roots in premodern soteriological practices which sought means to end the cycle of rebirth and attain liberation and emerged across a range of Indian traditions from the fifth-century BCE (Mallinson and Singleton 2017, pp. xii–xxiii). Tattva Yoga practices are broadly shaped by these trajectories of embodied liberation, identifiable in the inclusion of breathing exercises, meditation, and mantra repetition. Yet the postural choreography which forms the core of Tattva Yoga classes derives from developments in physical culture circulating globally in the modern period, as body building, gymnastics, and postural yoga practice intermingled (Singleton 2013). As such, Tattva Yoga and the current boom in yoga practices which it embodies provides a fruitful site for analysing the interplay between global flows of ideas, knowledge, and practice while accounting for their localizing variations across time and place.

<sup>1</sup> “Yoga” denotes a historically complex and varied set of practices not straightforwardly equatable with the popular physical practices associated with the label today (De Michelis 2004; Mallinson and Singleton 2017; Singleton 2010). Current scholarship refers to transnational anglophone yoga, transnational postural yoga, and modern postural yoga to demarcate modern transformations in “yoga”, in which an emphasis on postural practice aims to improve the health and often “‘spiritual’ development” of practitioners (Singleton 2013, p. 37; see also De Michelis 2004; Singleton 2010).



The practices and prominence of contemporary yoga forms have been attributed to an affinity with the neoliberal contexts through which they have spread (Godrej 2017; Jain 2021; Polis Schutz 2013; Schnäbele 2013). Further to a widespread commercialization of yoga and the orientation of yoga schools towards profit (Jain 2015; Lavrence and Lozanski 2014; Schrank 2014), contemporary yoga forms arguably reflect elements of neoliberal ideology (Jain 2021, p. 53).<sup>2</sup> Thus the incorporation of yoga discourse into company culture improves the productivity of workers while furthering a neoliberal ideology of individual responsibility and self-management (Jain 2021; Schnäbele 2013). Imaginations of “India as an inexpensive source of raw material for western projects of personal self development” (Black 2021, p. 15), as well as ongoing appropriation and commodification of cultural difference, perpetuate the dynamics by which empire and colonialism provide a fundament for neoliberal structures (see Antony 2018; Black 2021; Jain 2021, p. 57). And proliferations of “New Age ‘Asiatic’ thought” throughout the west may cultivate political indifference and passivity under the mantle of “inner peace” (Zizek 2001, n.p.).

Tattva Yoga is heterotopically positioned in relation to neoliberalism more generally and the mainstream yoga industry specifically. The main studio is located in a central, established Amsterdam neighbourhood. Classes are run in English, and attract a large percentage of expats, foreign students, and tourists. The practices mix influences from Ashtanga and Iyengar traditions with devotion to the Indian guru Neem Karoli Baba and the teaching style of the New York-based Jivamukti franchise. At the same time, the owners are openly critical of the “yoga industrial complex” and explicitly identify it as a dimension of capitalism: individualized, profit driven, and glorifying physical prowess and beauty over spiritual liberation. Tattva Yoga rather emphasizes its local, community character. The owners train all teachers at the studio in the specific choreography of postures and teaching methods. Teachers are barred from wearing visibly branded clothing in class. Students pay in cash or with a stamp card, as the owners have long resisted a digital registration system. Located in a converted garage on a residential street, the space rejects the sleek aesthetic common to many global yoga franchises. Tattva Yoga, thus, presents itself in both its formal teaching and its atmosphere as a respite from the pressures of commerce, labour, and consumption in daily life: a resistance to both neoliberal logic and commercialized yoga forms.

Exposing the complicity, connection, and potential resistance between transnational postural yoga and neoliberalism plays an important role in historicizing this contemporary cultural form. Yet simply reducing yoga practices to either working out or working against the biopolitical arm of neoliberal ideology risks reifying and essentializing Tattva Yoga, the practices it teaches, and neoliberalism as monolithic structures. To avoid such reification Lauren Berlant prescribes tracing “the messy dynamics of attachment, self-continuity, and the reproduction of life that are the

<sup>2</sup> Andrea R. Jain defines neoliberal yoga as emphasizing “the importance of self-governance and individual responsibility as well as the value of entrepreneurship. [It] privileges meritocracy [...] that leads to the envied lifestyle of personal growth, self-care, health, wellness and even liberation” (2021, p. 51).



material scenes of living on in the present”, dynamics brought into focus by attending to affectivity (Berlant 2011, p. 15).

To trace the affective dynamics of Tattva Yoga practices, this analysis attends to precarity as the dimension of neoliberalism which structures the daily lives of participants. Precarity names a socioeconomic and political reality as well as a collective affective configuration characterized by reflexive perceptions of insecurity, instability, and unpredictable change. Attending to affectivity at Tattva Yoga reveals that even as the practices demonstrate some continuities with modern and historical yoga practices, they also articulate a subjectivity that responds to demands of precarity. In this sense, Tattva Yoga stages a “drama of adjustment” to the present as lived under conditions of precarity (Berlant 2011, p. 3).

An analysis of Tattva Yoga practices productively builds on Berlant’s theory to interrogate *how* such affective adjustment occurs. Echoing both yoga’s soteriological premodern roots and the transformations of modern physical culture, Tattva Yoga practices constitute a form of embodied subject cultivation that aim at the transformation, or liberation, of the self. Olaf’s injunction encouraging students to “learn to feel” references the logic at the heart of Tattva Yoga’s practices. It is through a robust practice of *feeling* that Tattva Yoga’s physical exercises become self-making practices, striving to cultivate a range of feelings which respond to conditions of precarity, including flexibility, openness, and balance. Tracing the emergence of these feelings in a close reading of Tattva Yoga practices productively enriches a conceptualization of feeling as the entanglement of body, subject, affect, and discourse. Moreover, it articulates the potential for feeling to not only envision but performatively enact alternative possibilities for living on amidst precarity.

## Practice and precarity in everyday life

Robert sometimes refers to his oration at the beginning of the popular Sunday morning Tattva Yoga class as his “church chat”, an allusion to its edifying tone which frames a spiritual teaching in context of everyday living. Today he begins by noting the early signs of spring in the city.

“We know that matter is never lost, it just changes energy, changes shape. It is the same with Shiva. He is the god of destruction, but that destruction is also a form of transformation, change, just like the flowers peeking out from under the snow – that’s Shiva’s transformation. We can of course also think of climate change, and the melting ice caps as part of this, and that is difficult. [pause]

Change is inevitable – and it can be difficult. You might see it when you look in the mirror in the morning and see a few grey hairs. That’s hard! It’s difficult if we are attached, if we are bound to a certain image of who we are. But if we understand that change is inevitable, and that it is not just destruction but also transformation, it isn’t as hard. To do that we can cultivate the qualities of Shiva – infinity, transformation, and non-attachment to the world of objects.



Don't get caught up in holding onto things – I want this or that – or ideas about yourself – I am this or that. Cultivate awareness of the Self, which is unchanging and eternal, and from there just witness the body and the mind from a distance, like sitting in a theatre and watching a movie.”

Robert's teaching engages a particular affective configuration familiar to regular practitioners at Tattva Yoga. He observes a series of common challenges, from ageing to climate change, acknowledging that practitioners may experience such looming personal or planetary demise as difficult. This teaching addresses a sense of perpetual change, the self-reflexive awareness of uncertainty. Robert subsequently invokes the Hindu deity Shiva, positively recasting a sense of destruction as that of transformation. It resonates visibly with students in the room, as some nod to themselves, some sigh gently, some smile.

The shared sense of uncertainty addressed in Robert's teaching is the affective hallmark of precarity. While a soteriological concern with liberation from suffering occupied even the earliest yoga traditions (see Mallinson and Singleton 2017, pp. xii–xx), the boom in modern postural yoga fits with a prominent self-awareness of uncertainty that has emerged alongside neoliberalism in 1990s. As a dimension of neoliberalism, precarity follows from the erosion of economic, political, and social institutions and relationships. It includes an economic problem involving capitalist labour and its impact on the body and mind, the degradation of the public sector and privatization of wealth, and the consequent impossibility of reproducing a life materially and in fantasy under these conditions (Berlant in Puar (ed.) 2012, p. 166). Under the social relations of precarity, political life arises in the experience that a crucial sustaining “‘bond’ is flawed or frayed [...] lost or irrecoverable” (Butler in Puar (ed.) 2012, p. 169).

Elaborating Williams' (1977) concept of the structure of feeling, Lauren Berlant traces how neoliberal pressures, the crumbling promise of social democracy, and a global finance crisis have contributed to a common sense of the present, drawing “diverse locales [into] more affective and political sync” (2011, p. 171). What is shared in this structure of feeling is a predominant relation of attachment and a reflexive mode of sensing the present moment as an impasse (*ibid.*, pp. 4–5). As structure of feeling precarity registers the insecurity and instability of continuous change and ongoing crisis (*ibid.*).

Although material precarity is unequal, its affective reach encompasses spaces of relative privilege. At Tattva Yoga, students who are mostly white, educated, financially secure women gather to exercise their able bodies, simultaneously receiving reassurance in the face of perceived insecurity, uncertainty, and vulnerability. With the normalization of neoliberalism, precarity and precarization have reached those previously sheltered, such that the “white middle class experience precarity as if it is new” (Lorey in Puar (ed.) 2012, p. 172). In fact, precarity has a long history within capitalism (*ibid.*, p. 165) and is now as historically radically unequal in distribution and severity across both global and local spheres (Butler in Puar (ed.) 2012, p. 170). Yet the precarity of Tattva Yoga practitioners is not merely imagined. Contemporary forms of precarity emerge in global, economic, and social centres as precarization is “democratized”, such that it is “no longer located at the ‘margins’, related to the



nonhegemonic” (Lorey in Puar (ed.) 2012, p. 172). The result is an ordinary “in which people find themselves developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on” (Berlant 2011, p. 8).

The Netherlands is participant in both the material and affective dimensions of precarity, including as it manifests in the global city of Amsterdam. The country demonstrates nationally specific versions of the more widely cast diagnoses of transnational anxiety and insecurity which proliferated around the turn of the century (see Bauman 2000; Beck 1992; Taussig 1992). Neoliberal elements have a long history in the country and the tension with social democracy turned in the 1990s towards their consolidation (Karsten 1999; Oudenampsen 2016), including reduced protection of social rights and prioritization of a dynamic labour market (Karsten 1999, pp. 315–316).<sup>3</sup> The period following was characterized in national memory as a crisis in belonging and national identity, prompting expressions of public insecurity which scapegoated the failure of multiculturalism as the culprit for economic and political shifts (Duynvendak 2011). As the public anxiety around multiculturalism at the turn of the century demonstrates, precarity intersects powerfully with another affective structure prominent in the Dutch landscape, the sense of innocence that props up white national identity (Wekker 2016). Innocence serves to cover over the colonization and historical as well as ongoing racism within the country (ibid.), a powerful reminder that the material and affective dimensions of precarity are unequally distributed within the nation as well as globally. This sense of vulnerability remains in political rhetoric and popular discourse, finding expression in white Dutch complaints of experiencing affective dislocation and “not feeling at home” in the present nation (Duynvendak 2011).

In Amsterdam, Tattva Yoga practitioners fall within the scope of the newly precarized in terms of labour patterns and social relations as well as in terms of affective configuration. Precarity sees cultural producers and knowledge workers subject to self-precarization and the normalization of insecure employment patterns (Lorey in Puar (ed.) 2012, p. 164). A similar pattern exists in performance work (Cvejic and Vujanovic in Puar (ed.) 2012, p. 167) and the academy (Butler in Puar (ed.) 2012, p. 167), while prevalence of temporary contract work may increase vulnerability for burnout.<sup>4</sup> During one class in 2019, whose composition is broadly representative of Tattva Yoga clientele, some 20 students are in attendance.<sup>5</sup> Many are freelance creative workers: an editor, an artist, a professional dancer, and a web designer. Two

<sup>3</sup> The NWO funded Market Makers research project develops a comprehensive account of neoliberal elements of the Netherlands from the post-war period (“About Market Makers”). Naomi Woltering argues that from 1989 a new socioeconomic paradigm emerged in the country, including the rule of the Purple coalition (1994–2002) which oversaw reductions in taxes, government spending, and loosening capital market regulation, alongside the delegitimization of trade unions (Market Makers, “The Consolidation of Neoliberalism”).

<sup>4</sup> In the Netherlands, a 2017 study indicated an increase in percentage of employees suffering from burnout, among women up to 15% from 9% the previous 2 years, naming temporary contracts as among the factors increasing risk of burnout (Muijen and Melse 2017).

<sup>5</sup> There are four men, consistent with a trend towards about 25% male students in classes. All but one pass as white; most paid approximately 15 Euros for the class, though some exchanged work with the studio for passes.



work in therapeutic roles as psychologists, others in academia. At least one is on recuperative leave from a professional job, representing a notable segment of Tattva Yoga clientele. About half of those in attendance are Dutch. The rest are international workers from North America, the United Kingdom, Italy, and Russia. Many are without family here, finding that Tattva Yoga provides a base for establishing community in a new country.

As Robert's discourse demonstrates, Tattva Yoga's teachings pertain to the context of everyday life. The practices speak to creative labourers, producers and consumers of emotion, part time contract workers, the burnt out, the professionally insecure. In this manner they respond directly to the affective conditions of life under precarity.

Robert returns to the themes of transformation, non-attachment, and temporality throughout the class. He speaks while students coordinate a series of dynamic stretches with the synchronized rhythm of their inhalations and exhalations. During one posture, he manually adjusts a student's torso so it is perpendicular to the ground.<sup>6</sup> "Don't lean forward or back. That indicates you are living too much in the future or the past. Stay in the present, don't get caught up in holding on, in anticipating."

Later he encourages the participants to "Stay optimistic! Our goal is to learn to witness the changes in the world without fear – the Berlin Wall came down, but now we are building a new one; global warming is happening; it all goes up and down. But you can stay steady, stay in the present. Live in the moment and practice non-attachment. That center is Shiva. The key is equanimity."

Finally, as students lay in relaxation at the close of class, he murmurs, "Practicing yoga doesn't mean we become robots. We have intense experiences; the practices open us up and bring us into the moment unmediated. Our experiences become stronger, but we recognize impermanence and we surrender to change." And after a long pause. "Make yourself a vessel through which the cosmos flows."

Robert states the goal: heightened feeling and unmediated connection, the cosmic vessel rather than the mechanized, labouring, unfeeling robot. He also sets out the terms for such adjustment: stay in the present, do not hold on, stay steady, surrender. Robert's commentary frames the physical practice as the means for achieving the subjectivity he promotes. When conducting physical postures, his instructions to let go, stay steady, and surrender refer equally to relaxing muscle tension and to releasing negative emotions. He instructs a student to stand more upright to prevent preoccupation with the past or future. In addition to staging a "drama of adjustment" to precarity (Berlant 2011, p. 3), Tattva Yoga practices demonstrate the means by which these adjustments are achieved. As the following section explores,

<sup>6</sup> Tattva Yoga teachers practice manual adjusts. The practice has seen recent debate in the transnational yoga community around (in)appropriate conduct. Remski's (2019) discussion of "somatic dominance" is emblematic of the controversy, which in 2019 remained relatively muted at Tattva Yoga.



the adjustments to precarity which Tattva Yoga practices undertake occur through a complex entanglement of body, affect, discourse, and subject which is glossed in Tattva Yoga teachings under the sign of feeling.

## Learning to feel: embodied subject cultivation

“Come up for headstand.” Students slowly begin to move themselves towards the challenging physical posture, legs lifting into the air. “If you think, ‘oh shit, headstand’, or ‘oh great, headstand’, those are attachments, fear, pride. You’re wasting your time. Stop suffering unnecessarily and feel content where you are.” Olaf moves through the room talking, making physical adjustments, moving one student’s feet a few centimetres left or right, guiding another’s lower back to lengthen, verbally cueing another to relax clenched mouth and fingers. His tone is encouraging, but instructive:

Feel the body, reach the legs and feet straight over the head. Feel the weight evenly in the forearms and wrists. Release the neck, soften the face. Breathe. [pause] If you need to come down, come down. But check whether it is your mind telling you stories or whether your body needs to rest. If it’s fear, stay up. Just stay up. Feel steady, feel balanced. [pause] There’s no shame in coming down; don’t look around to see ‘oh, she’s still up, oh, he has a beautiful practice.’ Listen to the body, learn to feel. Lead yourself, don’t be led by the group or by me. I don’t know when you should come down, I’m not in your body. Here we learn to feel.

Olaf’s instruction involves the recurrence of the word feel(ing) and its association with both repeated references to the body and to various personal qualities. As a concept, feeling constitutes a prominent component of Tattva Yoga practices. During classes the word appears alongside instructions for physical postures, in spontaneous elaborations on the ethical-spiritual teachings, and in comments relating yoga practice to everyday life. It also references classically identifiable emotions (anger, fear), attitudes (surrender, contentment), or bodily qualities (flexibility, balance, openness). Despite its frequent and polysemic deployment, at Tattva Yoga, feeling remains an informal concept, not self-consciously theorized in relation to teachings on yoga philosophy, nor included in the curriculum of the teacher training programme. This colloquial and taken for granted presence, alongside its ubiquitous deployment during classes, indicates the extent to which the concept is integrated into the discursive landscape of Tattva Yoga practices.

In learning to feel, Olaf instructs practitioners to feel the position of the body in space as well as its internal state, cueing the proprioceptive and interoceptive awareness commonly developed in postural yoga practices (Schmalzl et al. 2021; Stern 2019). He simultaneously invokes emotions or character traits ranging from contentment, steadiness, and balance to suffering, fear, and pride, all united here under the sign of feeling(s). Olaf indicates that one may not feel steady, content, or balanced at first, but this is the goal to work towards through repeated practice, until transformation is eventually achieved. In Olaf’s teaching, the physical posture provides the





basis for transformation. One becomes balanced in character through practising to balance the body in space. Feeling transforms physical practice to subject cultivation. Learning to feel at Tattva Yoga is to make sense with and through the body, the reiterative execution of corporeal acts aimed towards cultivating the self.

Feeling remains relatively underexplored in comparison to disputes over the nature and validity of distinction between affect and emotion (cf. Ahmed 2014; Leys 2011; Massumi 1995; Terada 2001). Affect theory deploys feeling to contrast the abstraction of affect conceptualized as unstructured intensity, rather emphasizing a bodily sensation identified through “checking” against the previous experiences of an individual (Shouse 2005, par. 3), or to emphasizes an interior, experiential dimension, a formulation distinct from the consequent socialized display of emotion (ibid., par. 4). These conceptual divisions between feeling, emotion, and affect are far from hard and fast. In arguing against their distinction, Sara Ahmed notes the tendency towards cognitive assessments of emotion and calls for a return to its bodily registers, arguing that ultimately “the distinction between sensation and emotion can be only analytic” (2014, p. 6). While Ahmed deploys David Hume’s term “impression” to “avoid making analytical distinctions between bodily sensation, emotion and thought as if they can be experienced as distinct realms of human experience” (ibid., p. 6), the insistence on the interrelation between body, subject, affect, and discourse resonates with Tattva Yoga’s deployment of feeling.

At Tattva Yoga learning to feel operates according to the logic of performativity, conjuring discursive acts which generate that to which they refer (Butler 1993). The performative logic can extend to embodied practices which aim towards the cultivation of interior states, as Mahmood (2005) elaborates in her work with pious Muslim women who strive to cultivate shyness or modesty. Mahmood’s interlocutors’ embodied practices operate as gestures correlating to the desirable interior states they seek: one “acts shy” in order to cultivate an interior state of “shyness”, or comports oneself bodily according to markers of modesty in an effort to cultivate the virtue of modesty (2005, pp. 156–158). Mahmood’s refinement of performativity provides a powerful argument for reiterative embodied behaviour as an agentic form of subject cultivation rather than a biopolitical mechanism through which hegemonic subject positions are inscribed onto the body. Her work reinforces an understanding of desires, emotions, and feelings as the product of discursive and also embodied practices, rather than essential qualities to be expressed (ibid., p. 157). Mahmood thus furthers an understanding of performativity by reinforcing that cultivation of the “interior” world of subjectivity may be a work of intentional, bodily practice.

Tattva Yoga practices operate in a comparable manner. Here too the body is a generative instrument which impacts upon a malleable and teachable subjectivity. Balance, in Olaf’s instructions, constitutes a feeling towards which practitioners aim through physical practice. It is a quality not inherent to the subject but a competence which can be learned over time. The logic hints at continuities with the soteriological traditions in which Tattva Yoga practices have roots, which seek liberation as casting off the body or a form of annihilation of the self (Mallinson and Singleton 2017). At Tattva Yoga, it is feeling which drives embodied transformation, by rendering bodily practices as self-making acts.



Tattva Yoga practices diverge from Mahmood's account in two respects. Mahmood attends primarily to semiotic elements of her interlocutors' bodily behaviour, as they enact the signs of virtues in order to cultivate them. Yet Tattva Yoga practices explicitly deploy the body in practices that may be physiologically as well as symbolically impactful. During physical yoga practice the movement of the body deploys proprioceptive, interoceptive, and kinaesthetic awareness (Schmalzl et al. 2021, p. 441; Stern 2019), skills correspondent with "increased ability to detect bodily signals of emotional states as they arise, and [which] therefore facilitate self regulatory responses to them" (Baas et al. 2004 in Schmalzl et al. 2021, p. 446).<sup>7</sup> Especially in combination with breathing techniques, postural practice is reported to affect neurophysiological or neurocognitive mechanisms (Schmalzl et al. 2021, p. 442) via the stimulation of the vagus nerve, a central player in autonomic nervous system regulation which sends and receives information between the internal organs and the brain (Porges 2011; Schmalzl et al. 2021; Stern 2019). Through this mechanism, conscious breathing "down-regulates" the stress response of the nervous system (Stern 2019, p. 230). Further, high vagal tone reportedly "lowers inflammation, improves resiliency, increases adaptability, supports homeostasis, and helps control mood and emotion..." (Stern 2019, p. 238). Beyond the embodied semiotic dimensions of performativity, the bodily execution of Tattva Yoga practices thus has extra-discursive, physiological ramifications for the cultivation of subjectivity.

While accounting for their physiological effects may appear to move Tattva Yoga practices of feeling beyond the realm of the performative, they are not easily divorced from the discursive self-making projects identified by Butler and Mahmood. The stimulation of the nervous system, homeostatic equilibrium, or heightened proprioceptive or interoceptive awareness need not necessarily be qualified in concepts of feeling, nor identified as particular feelings such as balance. Such qualification is specific and shaped by the context in which it emerges. As Ahmed observes with respect to emotion, "what has been described as automatic describes the effects of a set of techniques, which have become habits, directing bodily matter as well as how things matter" (2014, p. 214). Tattva Yoga's technique of learning to feel, coupling physiological qualities to personal characteristics, illuminates a second divergence from Mahmood's theorization of embodied subject cultivation. Tattva Yoga practices occur across a distance between the bodily action and the subjectivity which it produces. The practitioner does not use headstand to act balanced in a straightforward capacity, the way that Mahmood's interlocutors act shy in order to cultivate a virtue of shyness. The skill enacted in the Tattva Yoga class is physical balance, which shares only a metaphorical relation to the quality of balanced character. Any relation between physical balance and a balanced disposition must be actively produced in order to infuse Olaf's simple postural instructions with a transcendent significance such that headstand transforms from a mere physiological trick

<sup>7</sup> Schmalzl et al.'s recent overview of studies on the physiological impacts of yoga practices also notes the limitations of such studies in the growing field of yoga research, including methodological weaknesses such as the use of inappropriate control groups, self-reporting methods, or insufficiently detailed information to allow experimental replication (2021, p. 452).



into a technique for self-making. The gap between bodily equilibrium and even-keeled orientation to the world is covered by the movement between connotations of balance, and slippage within the polysemy of feeling.

Tattva Yoga practices thus enrich conceptualizations of feeling by illuminating the generative role that not only discourse but affect and body play in cultivations of the self. Feeling constitutes the means through which Tattva Yoga practitioners stage an adjustment to the present. As such, the feelings cultivated as a part of this adjustment respond to conditions of precarity.

### **Precarity's feelings: flexibility, openness and balance**

Maybe sink a bit lower” says Robert to students in lunge position, “release the hips – this is where fear and stress are stored. We all have that. Release, let it go. Now, raise the arms wide to the side, palms forward. This is a sign of openness. Embrace the world!

Standing on one leg, “Look at a spot in front of you which doesn’t move. Raise the arms overhead. Find a point of stillness within. Feel balance. Inhale, and exhale. Every wobble is a thought.”

Reach the arms behind the back and bring the hands together” instructs Olaf. Hands clutch at wrists to maintain the difficult position. “Don’t grab. Open the hands, unite the palms; an expression of yoga. We don’t hold on. Open up. Just let go... Whatever you are hanging on to, let go. Let go.

Don’t worry if you aren’t there, maybe in twelve more years, or twelve more lifetimes.” Robert laughs kindly at frustrated faces. “Slowly, over time, we become more flexible. A flexible mind in a flexible body...”

In their instructions, Robert and Olaf cue students to open up, feel balanced, and cultivate a flexible mind in a flexible body. Flexibility, openness, and balance feature prominently in Tattva Yoga teachings as feelings which connote not only physical practice but qualities towards which practitioners aim. The bodily postures associated with these feelings are to a certain extent continuous with historical or modern trajectories of yoga philosophy and postural practice. Yet their intensified prominence as components of a desirable subjectivity also corresponds to the context of precarity in which Tattva Yoga is embedded.

Robert indicates that posture practice produces a flexible mind in a flexible body. The cultivation of flexibility arises from the interactions in the twentieth century between gymnastic forms and earlier postural practices which eventually came to constitute modern postural yoga (Singleton 2013, pp. 37–38). Physically, flexibility involves suppleness, ability to withstand and absorb applied force without breaking, and a broad range of movement. Deep stretching may have a biomechanical impact on the body’s fascia, preventing swelling and tension and possibly promoting the “regulation of tissue fluid, metabolic homeostasis, and [...] immune surveillance” (Schmalzl et al. 2021, p. 442). As an element of subjectivity, flexibility is central to



precarity. Although flexibility emerges in demands for time and freedom from the labour structures of “jobs for life” (Neilson and Rossiter 2005, par. 5), the concept comes to characterize a continuous readjustment of labour forms, “from illegalised, seasonal and temporary work to homework, flex- and temp- work to subcontractors, freelancers or so-called self- employed persons” (ibid., par. 4). Feeling flexible under conditions of precarity involves adapting to fit the specifications of employers, expanding one’s range of movement in working multiple or changing short term contracts or without job security. It involves adjusting to changing circumstances and absorbing stress. According to the performative logic of feeling in Tattva Yoga practices, by attentively stretching muscles, the practitioner becomes more flexible in relating to the world, ultimately eradicating expectations about what happens next.

Tattva Yoga instructions on openness connote a capacity for accepting a wide range of potential occurrences. In physical terms, opening refers to postures which stretch the sternum and chest. Such expansive postures may be associated with lowered cortisol levels and “enhanced feelings of psychological power” (Carney et al. 2010, in Schmalzl et al. 2021, p. 443) as well as increases in positive mood (Shapiro and Cline 2004, in Schmalzl et al. 2021, p. 443). As a feature of precarity, openness precludes the closure of certainty. Labour relations under precarity are “precisely precarious—that is to say, given to no essential connection but perpetually *open to temporary and contingent relations*” (Neilson and Rossiter 2005, par. 18, emphasis added). At Tattva Yoga, gestures of physical expansion pair with teachings about cultivating willingness to receive. The loaded terminology of openness resonates in Robert’s instruction to embrace the world, arms outstretched. Rendered as a feeling under precarity, openness connotes a willing capacity to accept present and future circumstances.

Physical balance postures at Tattva Yoga involve standing on one leg, the hands, or the head. Balance is frequently discussed at Tattva Yoga in dualist terms: the balance of the inhale and exhale in frequency and duration; of left and right in bodily gesture; of strength and suppleness in the body. Balance has also been deployed as a metaphor for homeostasis in recent explorations of yoga’s physiological effects (Stern 2019, p. 217). At Tattva Yoga balance connotes a quality of equanimity amidst change, an echo of some premodern sources identifying yoga with equanimity (Mallinson and Singleton 2017, p. 5). Balance responds directly to several characteristics of precarity, including instability, contingency, and polarization. The uncertainty associated with precarity derives from the oscillation of perpetual affective, relational, material change, and the contingency of forms of employment as well as personal relations. As the ground shifts continually underfoot, balance is a necessary requirement for subjectivity. Feeling balanced involves adjusting to new circumstances and absorbing stress without structural damage.

Practices guiding the release of undesirable feelings accompany the cultivation of the feelings flexibility, openness, and balance at Tattva Yoga. Feelings are understood to be stored in the body, and the relaxation of particular muscle groups correspond to their evacuation. The corporeal technique of letting go of muscle tension (“sink a bit lower” into the posture, or “open the hands” that are gripping), is associated with the affective technique of managing feelings by letting go of fear, stress



and “whatever you are hanging on to”. Clearing out these negative feelings enables the cultivation of desirable feelings.

That Tattva Yoga teachings name flexibility, openness, and balance as feelings points to the role of feeling in the context of precarity. Berlant argues that conditions of post-Fordist, capitalist, and globalizing affect are defined not by a single shared emotive experience, but a structural similarity in the form of attachment which may be experienced in any number of ways (2011, p. 13). In the case of Tattva Yoga, the shared sense of insecurity, fragmentation, and vulnerability which characterizes the present manifests in a formulation of feeling at the crossroad of body, subject, affect, and discourse.

In one sense, flexibility, openness, and balance mark the emergence and intensification of feelings suited to conditions of contingency, uncertainty, and instability. In this line of interpretation, just as physical therapeutic practices rehabilitate bodies exhausted from work to enable their continued productivity, Tattva Yoga provides the means for neoliberal subjects to expunge these undesirable by-products of labour and recuperate body and self to remain functional in the workplace. The discourse of letting go as non-attachment is, thus, criticized by Slavoj Žižek as cultivating a subject who “drift[s] along, while retaining an inner distance and indifference to the dance of accelerated process, [... conceptualized as] a proliferation of semblances that do not really concern the innermost kernel of our being” (2001, n.p.). More generously, the correlation between flexibility, balance, and openness and the conditions of daily life under precarity may be read as tactics enabling practitioners to manoeuvre within the material and affective structural conditions of precarity (de Certeau 1984). Practitioners pursue a subjectivity that endures uncertainty, fraying social and political bonds, and the unfulfilled fantasy of security. The self-making project encourages subjects who are able to accommodate, adapting to a range of circumstances without deteriorating, snapping, or stubbornly refusing to move.

Yet to interpret Tattva Yoga practices as adjustments to precarity need not reduce them to an enabling or reactive function. Feeling, Tattva Yoga practices demonstrate, may also envision and enact alternative forms for life under conditions of precarity. Contingent insecurities generate a sense of frayed, fragmented, worn out subjectivity. In their teachings presented above, Olaf and Robert describe yoga practice as the cultivation of states distinctly alternative to those which define precarity, such as contemplation, connection, reciprocity, and immediacy. When Robert deploys the metaphor of the “vessel through which the cosmos flows”, he describes a subjectivity which is not indifferent but invested, not an unfeeling “robot” but a porous, capillary, conduit continuous with that which it contains and is contained within. Yoga practices, he says, offer adjustment to the present in the form of an “unmediated” access to the moment, an intensification of experience that thrives within conditions of impermanence even as it seeks to escape them. These qualities resonate with alternatives to the present moment of impasse and crisis proposed elsewhere, including Byung-Chul Han’s insistence on contemplation as a means of generative resistance to burnout (2015), Farah Godrej’s assertion of the introspective potential with which yoga practices might problematize neoliberal subjectivity (Godrej 2017, p. 788 qtd. in Jain 2021, p. 19), or the proliferating explorations of



the political potential which breathing offers as a symbolic and material form (e.g. “Bifo” Berardi 2018; Górska 2016; Mbembe 2021).

Discursive statements expounding on reciprocity and contemplation in a yoga class do not necessarily lead to their actualization, just as “the self enhancement of yoga-body practices does not entail resistance to modern economic systems” (Koch 2013, p. 245, in Bevilacqua 2021, p. 398; see also Jain 2015, 2021). But as Tattva Yoga practices hint, feeling and its entanglement of body, subject, affect, and discourse may open up additional potentialities in which alternative forms of living in precarity are envisioned and enacted. Feeling has the potential to expand considerations of, for example, immediacy and connection beyond the discursive, through a performative logic of bodily practice. This potential is identifiable when, as a training in interoception and proprioception, postural practices that cultivate awareness of the physiological sensation of “being in the moment” flesh out ethical elaborations on immediacy. Similarly, the “down-grading” of the sympathetic nervous system through postural and breathing practices in a Tattva Yoga class may contribute to establishing conditions of possibility for enacting connectivity, as it is only “when we are non-defensive [that] we are connected” (Porges in Stern 2019, p. 231). And breathing techniques that consciously enact the reciprocal relation between body and environment render the metaphor of “the cosmic vessel” perceptible and meaningful. Such potentialities are fragile and not determinative. Nonetheless, just as Tattva Yoga practices cultivate subjectivities correspondent to neoliberal demands, they also contain the potential for generating forms of connection, immediacy, and reciprocity. As an adjustment to the present, Robert’s invocation of the vessel and the subjectivity he sketches is not lip service, nor even (just) an imagination of possibility, but a potentiality which may be realized through its performative bodily enactment in learning to feel.

Acknowledging that the feelings cultivated in Tattva Yoga practices facilitate endurance of the subject under conditions of change and insecurity does not preclude nor guarantee the political effects of these practices. But as means for making sense of and through the body, Tattva Yoga practices open up questions about the potentiality of feeling as a means to both envision and enact alternative subjectivities for precarity.

## Conclusion

As a scene of adjustment to precarity, Tattva Yoga practices provide practitioners with a means for grappling with a pervasive and reflexive sense of contingency, uncertainty, and vulnerability. This adjustment operates through a performative logic in which bodily action constitutes subject cultivation under the sign of feeling. Feeling, in this case, is inescapably bodily yet nonetheless teachable and capable of cultivation through skilled practice, the generative entanglement of body, subject, affect, and discourse. The feelings cultivated in these practices, including flexibility, openness, and balance, point to the intensification of particular subjectivities under conditions of precarity. At the same time, they arise alongside and enact potential



alternative forms for living on amidst amidst contingency and uncertainty, such as connection, immediacy, and reciprocity.

The question which an exploration of feeling at Tattva Yoga opens is political. In their critical assessment of precarity, Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter deploy keywords as a subheading defining the concept: “Uncertainty, flexibility, transformation” (2005, n.p.). They emphasize the ambivalent doubleness inherent to precarity which brings together “an interminable lack of certainty, the condition of being unable to predict one’s fate or having some degree of stability on which to construct a life”, and political potentialities which “accept and exploit” the “flexibility” which such labour conditions demand (ibid., par. 9). Tattva Yoga practices participate in both sides of this ambivalent character of precarity at the level of feeling(s). In light of the call to discover forms for, “a life in which contingency and instability are no longer experienced as threats” (ibid., par. 55), Tattva Yoga practices pose the question of whether practices of feeling can open a political possibility at the heart of precarity.

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