

**Title:** Changing stories of self, changing priorities: turning to yoga to re-imagine aging.

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**Abstract**

Where do priorities for care come from? One of the many sources for our thinking about care and what matters for care is our sense of self. Narratives of self can shape priorities for care. Consider the medical narrative and how its materialist, control-oriented conception of the human being has driven conventional health care and shaped dominant understandings of aging. Indeed, the Age-Friendly City initiative emerges from an attempt to move beyond medical approaches to aging, which have constructed aging as a time of decrepitude and disease. Instead, the Age-Friendly City initiative is guided by narratives of successful, active aging: stories that focus on empowerment, inclusion and engagement. These aspirations shape many of the guidelines and priorities for cities that are embarking on becoming age-friendly. However, as critics have noted, narratives of active aging continue to reproduce many of the problematic assumptions that underpin the medical model. While more optimistic, there remains a focus on the individual, a desire for control, and an aversion to mortality and the vulnerabilities this entails. How to tell our stories differently? And what new priorities for care might ensue? In this paper we turn to yogic practice and philosophy to tell a different story about who we are and what we might need. Our paper draws on a multi-year ethnography of an intentional community of yogic practitioners in which we were participant observers. Drawing on our experiences as well as conversations and interviews with participants we suggest that the yogic “darshan” may be conceived of as a non-modern narrative of self. Rather than focusing on control, the yogic story attends “*being*” and draws on knowledges and practices (postures, meditation, breathwork, chanting, etcetera) to cultivate a capacity attend to being. From this perspective we consider differences in the way self/personhood and change/loss are lived and their implications for growing old and dying. Our study was guided by post-colonial theories which have recognised the tendency for Western assumptions to colonize their subjects of inquiry. In the effort to decolonize methodologies, our ethnographic study was collaboratively designed and conducted by a life-long yogi (SJK) and a social scientist (AB). We conclude by reflecting on what the yogic narrative of self might mean for research on age-friendliness and the guidelines we might imagine.

## **Introduction**

Interest in yoga and meditation is growing rapidly, with both becoming well-accepted in mainstream healthcare. Though commonly associated with stress-relief, research demonstrates that both yoga and meditation provide numerous benefits, including contributing to the management of emotions, anxiety, pain, hypertension and depression (Koike & Cardoso, 2014; Miller, Fletcher, & Kabat-Zinn, 1995; Ortner, Kilner, & Zelazo, 2007; Teasdale, Pope, Moore, Hayhurst, & Williams, 2002). This growing body of research approaches these practices as tools to achieve conventional healthcare goals, such as the prevention and/or treatment of disease. The approach we take is different.

We seek to explore the transformative potential of yog (referring to both the postures and meditation), inquiring as to whether and how yog might transform the way we understand our health, aging and mortality. Our interest in transformation is inspired by a line of inquiry that recognizes that although many pressing social challenges, such as growing social inequality, climate change, and an aging population, are typically framed in political and economic terms, they also have important existential and spiritual dimensions that engage the values and meanings that motivate us (c.f. Alexander, 2008; Klein, 2014; Macy & Brown, 1998).

However, because of the prevalence of instrumental approach to yoga and meditation which we believe thwarts its transformative potential, in this talk we aim to highlight some important ontological and ethical differences between yogic perspectives and the conventional, western or modern worldview. To do so, we have chosen to present our research as a dialogue between yog and the concept of successful aging. We choose successful aging, partly because it has become one of the most important and certainly inspiring paradigms in gerontology. And partly because it rehearses so many of the dominant and problematic values of modernity, which makes it helpful as a means of highlighting some of yog's key qualities and differences.

## **Successful aging**

According to Katz and Calasanti (2015) successful aging has become one of gerontology's most successful concepts. It has been compared to an obligatory passage point in research on aging (Bülow & Söderqvist, 2014), which is to say that if you are going to do serious scholarship on aging you will likely need to engage with this concept at some point. Successful aging also bleeds into our personal life, and my guess is that there are few people among us that haven't heard of its recommendations or taken them up in some way.

One of the reasons for successful aging's uptake is the highly, some would say hyper, optimistic vision of aging (Lamb, 2017b). When the concept emerged it really turned the conventional narrative of aging as a natural process of decline on its head. Rather, according to its most famous advocates Rowe and Kahn (1987, 1997), the paradigm claims that much of the decline and loss associated with growing old can be avoided. And it can be avoided through the efforts of individuals - things YOU CAN DO as lay people - guided by latest scientific research - and so it gives a nice role for US as researchers as well.

As many of the reviews of the successful aging literature demonstrate (King, 2017), it is a paradigm that invites us to become the creators of our own futures, cultivating active, healthy, vital lives through the choices we make – from diet and exercise to our attitudes and social engagements.

However, it has not been lost on critics that in its hyper-positivity the paradigm is profoundly ageist. Not only does it reproduce the discomfort with growing old but it rehearses the very values that contribute to our culture's aversion to aging in the first place. The successful aging paradigm is a celebration of being youthful, active, able-bodied, cognitively high functioning, and productive. We could say that it tries to solve the problem of aging by eliminating growing old. And in doing so, it doesn't really provide us with new values nor new ways of aging or being mortal.

### **Learning from yog**

To take up the challenge of finding new sources of inspiration we turned to a non-western tradition: that of yog. Yoga and contemplative practices like mindfulness have become mainstream within North America, and they are often taken up in the context of health, fitness, and emotion and stress management. However, our interest in the *transformative* potential of yog led to the study of a yogic meditation institute in India. An Indian-born guru headed the institute, though most of the practitioners were from the West, affording a unique opportunity to study a vibrant dialog between worldviews.

### *The study*

Our study was also influenced by post-colonial critiques of research methods, which recognize the tendency for Western assumptions to colonize their subjects of inquiry (Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008).

In an effort to decolonize our approach, this study was collaboratively designed and conducted by a scientist raised in the yogic world view (SJK) and a social scientist (AB). As an example of the complexity of yoga in a globalized world, the white woman is the established yogi who grew up in India. She was formed in a yogic environment, learning to speak hindi and read Sanskrit. While the brown skinned man of Indian descent was born in Canada, with little understanding of India or appreciation for its culture. This latter observation and as well as in depth interviews with yogis at the institute. As table 1 illustrates we interviewed an experienced group of people, who have practiced for decades which means they are also relatively old.

<b>Table 1: Ethnographic study of a yogic meditation institute</b>	
Years of fieldwork (Albert)	3.10
Number of interview participants	37 (20 women; 17 men)
Average age	61 (82 to 27 years)
Average years meditating	36 years
Living in India	31 full-time; 5 half-time
Born in India	0
Born in Europe or North America	37

### **What is yog?**

In the west, we have come to understand Yog, or Yoga, as physical postures. In the institute we studied, it is far more than that. All matter and thoughts change, therefore things exist along a timeline governed by change. So what is anything? Yog takes an enduring view on what **is**.

Within the Yogic worldview, there exists an Isness, an unchanging awareness prior to the emergence of mind/personality and conditionings, even prior to the experience of existing. This awareness which we come closest to experiencing in deep sleep, is the fundamental, unchanging source.

Yog can be called a process, and a skill. It is also an unchanging awareness as a lived state of being. It can be described this way to a human being as that is how a human being, with a binary sense of knowing, based on categories and dualities, will engage with it to relate to it. In yogic reality Yog is not defined by dualistic categories. It is everything and it is no thing.

Within the yogic world view, ultimately, the goal is self-realization; complete realization of self as unchanging awareness. In the worldview that exists in this room, this might not resonate or might not make much sense. That is fine and to be expected. In the context of this paper, we'll be highlighting yog as a location or placement of self. We'll have some of our interviewees shed some light on this in what follows.

### **Dialogue 1: Ontology of Self**

Despite its claims to being a novel approach, the narrative of successful aging does not offer us a different way of imagining ourselves. Indeed, it continues to reproduce the modern vision of self as a supposedly autonomous individual, standing separate and apart from nature and extends this vision to old age. It's a vision of self wherein we believe we have – or should have – control over ourselves, our lives and the world around us.

We are also rational actors in this story or at least we ought to be. And we apply that rationality to maximize our control, exerting our will to shape our lives and the environment so that they suit our desires. Indeed, achieving this control over our lives is what the research on successful aging is intended to enable.

The limits of this way of understanding ourselves have been well documented and we don't want to rehearse them here. But it is worth noting one of the threats aging poses is precisely to this vision of self that is rational, independent, productive and in control. And hence successful aging venerates a narrative of self that fuels the fear of growing old.

We agree with Sarah Lamb (2017a) that if we are to challenge successful ageing then we must not only critique its underlying assumptions we also need to find other, different, inspiring ways of re-imagining ourselves. It is here that yoga can make some promising contributions, which we want to explore albeit briefly.

*The yogic self*

The Self within yogic ontology is distinguished from the mind and body. In yog we are not limited as mind nor body. Rather we that *awareness* that *knows* the mind and *knows* the body. The central practice within yog – certainly within the institute we studied – was to keep revealing this underlying “awareness” or “being” and identifying with it as one’s unchanging or ageless self.

As Lisa observes:

Yog is the reversal of “I think therefore I am.” From a yogic perspective, *I am* therefore I think; therefore I feel, therefore I speak, therefore I breath.

That “I am” - which seems to go completely unnoticed - is noticed, valued, cherished, practiced and unfolded here.

- Lisa, Age 57; 37 years practicing

Lisa’s pointing to what might be termed pure being. Life itself as one’s source of self. Coming to understand oneself as that is the yogic project. The practice of unfolding that “I am” involves multiple techniques and requires a constancy of effort. Meditation, physical postures, chanting, philosophical inquiry were just some techniques that were used to reveal and deepen this connection to one’s own being.

When we look at the subjective experience of revealing this awareness, it was often represented as a form of “coming home to oneself.” Others described feeling whole, fulfilled, or inherently content. A profound sense of peace or stillness was also reported.

Speaking of a particularly powerful experience in Swami’s company, Karen remarks, “that experience completely and utterly convinced me that we are meditation. That is our home. That is who we are. And that is who absolutely every person is.”

- Karen, age 58; 21 years practicing

Its worth noting the practice also transformed one’s relationship to the mind and body. The body was often described as a vehicle, which one needed to care for. Similarly, as we can see in the quotes below, the mind was often likened to a tool – an instrument that was useful in navigating the world – but no longer source of one’s identity. Both body and mind were held more lightly.

“I look at my mind as a tool. I don’t look at it as me. It is a tool that I need to discipline and use to get me where I want to go.”

- Karen, age 58, 21 years practicing

“Now my relationship with my mind is much more watching it, appreciating it, being puzzled by it, being amused by it. But not having to identify and sway with it in the same way as I used to.”

- Bethany, age 64; 24 years practicing

In Bethany’s statement above, you can probably sense some freedom, and we certainly heard that one outcome of their practice was a greater experience freedom and a transformation in their understanding of freedom. Importantly, for our discussion here, yogis’ sense of freedom or autonomy was granted by their ability to reveal and dwell as awareness experienced as whole and content. It was not about creating an external situation that suited them. As Mason described it:

“I used to think freedom was to be able to do what I wanted to do...that was my concept of freedom. But after meeting Swamiji, I realized that freedom didn’t really have anything to do outside of me, it had everything to do inside of me.

So if I was free inside - meaning satisfied, complete - then that freedom wasn’t dependent on getting something or being with someone or going somewhere. Freedom was my own true nature.”

- Mason, 65 years, 45 years as a practitioner

As everyone we interviewed noted, this was a profound shift not only in the way they knew themselves but how they related to the world. And it was both – contradictory as it may sound – a moment’s realization and a life’s work.

### **Dialogue 2: attitude towards suffering**

Taking up another critique of successful aging, the orientation to vulnerability (e.g., disease, frailty and loss) within the successful aging narrative is pathologically one-sided. It is an attitude of problematization, in which loss occurs as a problem rather than say a rite of passage ripe with opportunity. And, following from the aspiration to control previously discussed, it is also an orientation that seeks to prevent or eliminate this loss. Thus, the successful aging narrative requires we first distinguish inevitable decline from decline that can be mitigated, and then calls

upon us to set about modifying whatever variables, indicators, risk factors we can control to prevent this loss.

While powerful and understandably appealing, it is also a pathological approach to the human condition in that it creates suffering and deepens the very the problem it sets out to solve. In other words, loss becomes all the more harmful and hard to bear. And those who fall ill, as research has shown (Cite), can experience shame, embarrassment, blame, and stigma.

### *The yogic attitude towards suffering*

By contrast, yoga offers a radically different orientation to loss and suffering. Rather than trying to distinguish the negative changing aspects that can be modified from those aspects that cannot be, the yogic worldview groups all changes together – good and bad; gains and losses; increases and decreases; birth and death.

Indeed, yog understands everything as changing except that awareness, being, or Self that is there knowing those changes. From a yogic perspective, attachment to these changing forms – whether they be supposedly good or bad - is a central cause of suffering. Thus, in the midst of change the yogi practices identifying with that *awareness* that is unchanging.

Perversely enough I'll tell you once you have had enough of that practice at some point by god suffer! Suffer a lot! Not just a little, a lot and quickly!

And the reason for that is because you actually grow. You don't grow with the suffering, you grow when you see your knowledge actually working when that suffering happens.....

When you get smacked around that's when you know if that smacking: how real is it? Can you still maintain that sense of I'm fine. Or you're buffeted like a boat in the middle of the ocean and you think you are going to capsize? And what ever you feel is fine, but you know where you are [in your practice].

If you can actually see that knowledge working when that happens, that affirmation means a lot. That confidence that, 'okay look I just went through that shit and I never lost sight of the fact that none of this shit was pleasant, none of it was pleasant but I'm not on that level' .....

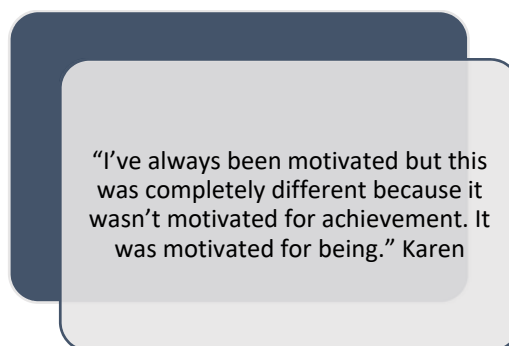
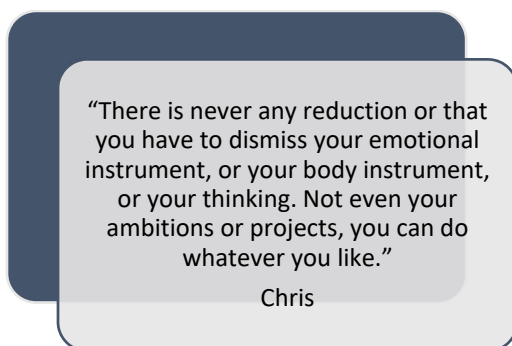
You [come to] see that "I am suffering" is not really a true statement. It's more like: "There is suffering. And I am there."

-Adam, 59 years old, 29 years practicing

When confronted with a loss of any sort – including the losses associated with aging or disease – the work of the yogi, as we can hear in Adam's quote, is to use these events as opportunities for investigation and freedom. The inquiry is into where one is sourcing oneself and the practice is

to source oneself in awareness. These losses are then not automatically framed as problems. Instead, they are made useful within the context of yogic practice as a means of revealing and dwelling as one's unchanging self.

Here caution is warranted. This is not to say that yogis neglected their health or well-being. We interviewed practitioners who were doctors and nurses and people caring for aging parents as well as their own aging bodies and we encountered all kinds of efforts being made to maintain the soundness of mind and the functioning of the body vehicle. Many told us their practice helped them with this and even alleviated some fear of aging and death. But neither fear nor the mourning of loss disappeared completely.



Because the practice of dwelling as awareness was experienced as a form of wholeness and contentment, it gave practitioners somewhere unswayed to go in the midst of what could be very challenging circumstances. And so the training allowed for lightness of being in some rather dire circumstances.

In concluding this dialogue, let me just wrap up by noting our research suggests that while the practice of yog doesn't change the facts of aging, decline, vulnerability, or death of the body, it does appear to provide a different relationship to the changes that happen throughout life and a different ground of being or place of self from which to relate to them. Our research also shows yogic practice offers, as the practitioners put it, a different set of goals or ambitions; Even a different understanding of what success might mean.

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