



the poetics of asana

embodying metaphorical language
in a hatha yoga practice

by **tias little**

with photographs by daniel séguin

In the Sanskrit language speech has tremendous power, for it is through speech that the spiritual aspirant can invoke the great and mysterious force that sustains all life. Speech is intimately associated with prana, the life breath of the body. By refining the breath, one can clarify speech, and by refining speech, one can clarify prana.





The ancient rishis, the mystical seers of the yoga tradition, held speech in the highest esteem. Speech was thought to be sacred, imbued with a curious power to awaken and animate the most profound and subtle life force hidden within. The mystical seers chanted cryptic hymns of devotional offerings to the deities of fire, water, earth and sky. The rishis' vocal chanting was similar to pranayama training in that their breath and vocal intonations, along with the rhythm and meter of the Sanskrit verses, activated their prana. The mantras they chanted, as they called in the spirit that pervades all life, had the resonance of lyrical poetry.

The poetic power of Sanskrit and the potency of the language used by the ancients to articulate the yogic experience have inspired me to teach with a metaphorical imagination. Speech, like writing, is a

creative process, and when I teach classes I draw from a palette of analogies, metaphors, similes and stories. As a student of literature, I was inspired by the voices of James Joyce, Fyodor Dostoevsky, T.S. Elliot and John Ashbery. Influenced by these and other poets and writers, I have been impelled to weave figurative and colourful language into my asana teaching.

One of my intentions as a yoga teacher is to inspire, and I find that metaphorical language can elevate the practitioner. The word metaphor is from the Greek *meta*, meaning beyond, and *pherein*, meaning to carry. Metaphors, like opening the eyes of the heart, carry or transport the listener from one meaning to another. They guide the listener from a singular meaning to, potentially, a plurality of meanings. Like yoga asanas, metaphors are meant to loosen.

I use inspirational language to help students

*She was a collection of all things that are natural
Similes of beauty, each one in its right place*

— Kalidasa

get out of themselves, to loosen restrictions and cut through the cobwebs of sticky thoughts. For instance, when I teach meditation, I describe a rising cumulus cloud to encourage students to elevate and broaden their chest in order to circulate more air through their lungs. The image of the heat and billowy vapour rising inside a midsummer's cloud provides a palpable sense of expanding lungs.

In the yoga tradition, there is an abundance of naturalistic metaphors to illustrate the body. The esoteric yogic anatomy of the body includes rivers of pulsing fluid (*nadis*), bands of shimmering light (*susumna*) and potentially blooming floral buds (*cakras*). The ancient yogis perceived in the subtle human body a richness and effulgence evident in the natural world. By evoking naturalistic metaphor today, the student of yoga awakens and animates the full energy dormant within.

Poetic language that evokes beauty and elevates awareness can increase one's capacity for sensitivity and gratitude. In the practice of asana and meditation, language helps attune the practitioner to movements within the body and build greater awareness. Imagery that evokes great feeling generates *bhava*, a profound state of affinity, soulfulness, devotion and heartfelt connection.

The great Sanskrit poet Kalidasa wrote verses that celebrate the sometimes terrible beauty of divine

energy. In the *Kumarasambhava* he renders Siva's consort Uma as both delicate and sublime:

*Whenever she began to speak, the tones
Would flow as sweet as amṛta in her voice
So that, on hearing her, even the song of the kokila
Seemed harsh as a veena being played out of tune.*

*She was a collection of all things that are natural
Similes of beauty, each one in its right place,
Fashioned by the universal creator with his full energy,
As if eager to see all beauty in a single form.*

Kalidasa's musical images and rhythmic flow recall the resonant chanting of the ancient seers. Both are meant to invoke a feeling of immense awe, respect, admiration and joy.

Like the ancient poets, yoga teachers can tap their own inspiration and channel inspired speech into their students. Metaphorical language inspires the listener, and it is through inspiration that the transformational effects of a yoga practice can be realized. If the metaphor is working well, the student absorbs the teachings through every skin fibre, cell and synapse.

When I'm teaching yoga, I find that poetic language inspires the imagination and gives students a visceral sense of the pulse of movement within. I use language to invite students to deep-rooted realms

*Wash yourself of yourself.
A white flower grows in the quietness,
Let your tongue become that flower.*

— Rumi

that were previously unavailable to the touch of breath and sensation. For example, in the Corpse pose, Savasana, one of the primary aims is to create a feeling of dissolution by allowing the brain to release and the mind to still.

I guide students to set the head with care, so that it is not tipping side to side or rocking backward. The weight should be on the centre of the back skull and the ears should be perfectly level. I suggest that students visualize the centrepoint of the skull in order to align the cranium with the spine. This centrepoint is like a mystical eye, what I think of as the fourth eye (given that the third eye is in the centre of the brow).

The brain is the most difficult organ to adjust in the body. It is easier to shift a kidney, elongate the spleen or rotate the liver. When adjusting the brain, one is approaching that threshold between the known and pure mystery. In Savasana, I encourage the back of the skull to release downward and broaden, as if a raw egg has broken onto the floor. For students to experience greater relaxation, I gently urge them to imagine their brain moving into itself, like the flesh of an overripe fruit pulling away from the rind.

The Sufi poet Rumi describes a similar release in the body's interior:

*There's no need to go outside
Be melting snow
Wash yourself of yourself.
A white flower grows in the quietness,
Let your tongue become that flower.*

The sublime delicacy of this Rumi image suggests a subtlety that is key to the yogic experience. The many paths of yoga take the assiduous student from

outer to inner, from gross to subtle, from the recognizable to the unknown. In yoga asana training, a mature student has developed the capacity for keen perception and is able to observe the most delicate edge of movement within. The more refined and rarefied the movement, the closer one is to god.

As a teacher, however, I find that the subtler and more rarefied the movement I wish to express, the more difficult the movement is to explain. How can one explain and direct a movement that is right at the edge of perception, approaching the imperceptible? How could one ever put into language the experience of total communion with the vast, unlimited force that pervades all things?

The ultimate state of yoga to be yoked, without interference, is a state that is beyond words. The language of yoga attempts to express the inexpressible. Inspired language, like poetry, comes closest to putting into words that which is unspeakable.

In yoga classes, I invite students to experience the unseen, the mystical, by tapping the sensory receptors in the body's muscles, joints and tendons. When I give directions, I use language that punctuates the asana forms, and provides students with tangible anatomical details. I do this by safely coaxing them to the edge of the familiar in their bodies, breath and mind.

The aim of yoga is to stay highly flexible and highly adaptable in one's awareness. In order to awaken and enliven, metaphorical language invites students to feel into difference. Whether working with chronic compression in the shoulder, the repetitive strain pattern buried in a hamstring, or the habitual tendencies of an obsessive mind, the purpose of practice is to break the bonds of recur-



ring cycles. Physical restriction becomes entrenched in the body, resulting in routine identifications that inevitably harden into character.

I teach this flexibility by guiding students to the threshold of the known, the familiar and the routine. This is where the real transformation takes place. If the student can stay pliable in both mind and body, then he or she will avoid getting stuck in what is simply familiar. The use of metaphor supports this loosening of identity structure by helping to point the listener beyond any finite, limited sense of self. The Spanish literary figure Antonio Machado describes it this way:

*What the poet is looking for
Is not the fundamental I
But the deep you.*

The poet's intention is to help his listener navigate inward, inviting the listener to tap the depths of imagination and bhava inside. Like the hymns of the seers, the poet, through the play of descriptive language, points away from himself by avoiding fixed identification and literal meaning. I share this same intention as I develop the craft of teaching yoga, and my aim is not to elevate "the fundamental I" but to invite my listeners, my students, into the "deep you." ☸

Tias Little brings to his teaching a wonderful play of metaphor and imagination. He combines the precision of Iyengar Yoga, the grace of Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga and the compassionate wisdom of the Buddhist tradition. He currently directs Prajna Yoga in Santa Fe, New Mexico (www.prajnayoga.net).

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