

# POSER

MY LIFE  
IN TWENTY-THREE  
YOGA POSES



CLAIRE DEDERER

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX ■ NEW YORK

## 5. PIGEON



I looked like something you'd find at the scene of a car accident. With my left leg sticking out behind me and my right leg pinned under my hips, I leaned forward onto my belly. Legs were not meant to be held in such a position. Legs were meant to stride or cross elegantly at the ankles or wear fancy tights or dance an Irish jig. They were meant to do anything, really, but this.

Really? I thought of asking Fran, the first time we did pigeon. Are you sure?

But now I had been doing pigeon for a month or two, and my attitude had changed. I realized it was not so much a pose as a mining expedition. I was digging in and finding stuff. Each time I did the pose, I got a little farther into my hip muscles. I seemed to pick up each day where I had left off before, and then go a little farther in my expedition, a little deeper in my probing.

My conception of my body changed. My hips came to seem a great dark unexplored area, like Conrad's Congo. Of course, as in the Congo, there had been plenty going on there all along. I just hadn't

been paying attention. I had always been dissociated from my hips. A friend, dancing with me in college, exclaimed with real excitement, "Hey! Your hips just moved." Since I became a mom and started carrying the baby around all day, my hips had become intensely impacted.

Today Fran had warned us that she expected us to hold the pose for quite a long time. As we lay there in attitudes of traffic-accident chic, she talked, quite mysteriously, about something called the koshas.

"Our selves are layered in what the yogis call koshas," said Fran. "We can think of them as sheaths. I'm going to describe them, and as I talk, I want you to move through them with me. Think about whether or not you can locate these different parts of yourself. Think about whether or not they can help you do this pose, or if this pose can help you to find them.

"The first sheath, or layer, is the annamayakosha. This literally means 'food sheath.' This is the part of us that is visible. Next is the pranamayakosha, the breath sheath. Or if you think of prana as energy, this is the energy sheath."

The pigeon haters (whose number is legion) in the group were beginning to shift and frown. Fran kept talking.

"The next layer is manomayakosha. This is the sheath of the self, of identity. It is also the sheath of our emotional life. Next is vijnamayakosha. This sheath has to do with intellect, judgment, and wisdom. We often mistake these two sheaths for the deepest self, especially in the West. But there's one more layer: the anandamayakosha. The bliss sheath."

Bliss sheath. I stored it away, as a nut in a squirrel's cheek, for later punning. Fran went on. "The bliss sheath is the truest self, the self most connected to the divine. It is always present in us, and most active when we are asleep. Practicing all the limbs of yoga can bring us closer to it. Release pigeon."

As I swung my leg out of pigeon, I thought about what Fran had said. It seemed entirely true and entirely false. There was something about this idea of the bliss sheath, a layer of divinity inside a person,

that made sense. I believed that it might exist, if only as a beautiful and dumb metaphor. But just as entirely I dismissed the idea that such a thing might exist inside of me. It was clearly something that would only ever be a reality for other people, like Vuitton bags or a tidy spice drawer.

"Look at the sutras," she said, not for the first time. "They're not, like, an easy read. But you might find something of interest there."

One of the problems with yoga was that there was no bible. No urtext. No word of god. Really, this is because yoga is a technique for knowing god, or even becoming god. A technique cannot have a bible. It has, instead, a manual. Or many manuals.

I began my exploration of the sutras with high hopes. I looked them up on the Internet, leaning heavily on Wikipedia, I'm sorry to say. Wikipedia is like the *People* magazine of research; everyone looks at it and no one will admit it. Anyway, I learned the sutras were compiled by someone called Patanjali in the second century. They are a compendium of the knowledge developed by yogis up until that point, written in aphorisms. Excellent, I thought. Aphorisms. Maybe they would have an Oscar Wilde-like pithiness. I set out with Lucy to buy a copy.

There was a street corner in the University District, or really, an alley corner, where Forty-second Street met the alley that ran between University Way and Fifteenth. Café Allegro, the oldest coffeehouse in Seattle, fronted onto the alley. Magus Books fronted onto the street.

I once heard a screenwriter refer to "the brown muffin." She said certain films, for instance those made by Merchant Ivory, look as though they've been shot through a brown muffin. That was what life felt like at this intersection. Everything was old, and worn, and amber-colored.

I stopped in at the Allegro first. Years ago, the Chinese restaurant a few doors up had spilled a vat of chicken fat out into the alley. The smell had somehow set in the sun, and now the Allegro always smelled a little animal and rancid. This was just right, because the Allegro was

a mean place. The servers could barely tolerate the sight of the patrons. My husband referred to the girls who worked there as “the bitches in their sweaters.” My mother said that the disappointment was palpable every single time she walked in the door. My friend Scott said it was the most ill-named coffee shop ever—it should, he said, be called Café Triste. I loved it. It was a relief from the constant niceness of our life.

I ordered. The servers ignored the beautiful girl parked on my hip. After I got my coffee, I ankled around the corner to Magus. I pushed open the glass door and entered a room of enormous tallness. The bookshelves went up up up ten feet, and then there was another expanse of ceiling above that, filled with dust motes drifting like the stuff of thought itself. It was as if the books were dreaming, and their dreams floated into the air above, just barely visible.

I took a token stroll through fiction, my homeland. It was against the back wall. I didn’t really belong in the Eastern Religions section, or wherever it was I might find the yoga sutras. Maybe self-help? Or maybe physical fitness? (The eternal conundrum of yoga.) These were not the books I read. When I needed information, I went to the source: novels. That’s where they keep the feelings. Religion and self-help books were merely diagrams. Novels were the full picture.

I reluctantly headed out into the vast reaches of nonfiction. The Eastern Spirituality section, halfway along a high shelf in the middle of the room, required the recruitment of one of those cylindrical metal step stools that look like they’ve rolled straight out of the 1950s. I set Lucy on the floor next to me, with a pile of books. Bhagavad Gita, *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran, *Tao Te Ching*, Upanishads. No *Yoga Sutras*. I looked on the shelf below. There was a pamphlet down there, more of a stapled folio than a book. I pulled it out. The paper was thick and yellowing. The print was indented in a way that suggested the thing had not been printed in the United States. I checked the copyright: Bangalore, 1972.

There was no introduction, no foreword, no preface. Just the sutras, which were numbered. What was a sutra anyway?

Number 1: “Now, the teachings of yoga.” This cracked me up a little. It sounded like Don Pardo. I read on.

Number 2: “Yoga is to still the fluctuations of consciousness.” I understood this just from practicing asana with Fran, the notion that when you presented your body with a series of challenging movements, you were also training your mind to be quiet, to endure and overcome difficult situations.

On to number 3: “Then pure awareness can abide in its very nature.” This seemed unlikely, and things just got unlikelier from there.

The more I read, the dustier Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras* seemed. The words did that thing where they became so dissociated from the world, and from concrete meaning, that they didn’t even seem like words anymore. It was like reading Kant. I flipped through the pages of the folio, looking for something to jump out at me and explain me to myself.

I wanted the sutras to pull me in emotionally, like a novel, and explain the world gently, by example. I wanted to escape into them as into a fantasy of another life.

But this wasn’t that kind of book. It wasn’t a novel. It wasn’t an escape. Hell, it was hardly even a book. It was a tract, and some of it appeared to be crazy. For instance, sutra 3.40: “By mastering the flow of energy in the head and neck, one can walk through water, mud, thorns, and other obstacles without touching down but rather floating over them.” If I wanted poetry, I’d be in a different section.

They were brief, yes, and looked aphoristic, but reading them was not like reading Oscar Wilde. It was like reading bread, or grass. Impossible.

Still, I rummaged around for a while, looking for words that might make sense to my eye. The philosophy of yoga was a series of rumors to me, and as I moved through the sections, I spotted things like the eight limbs, a term I had heard repeatedly but sometimes got mixed up with the eightfold path of Buddhism. (Maybe this is how Americans pick foreign religions—we like the ones with lists. Maybe it’s the same impulse that drives us to pick up magazines that promise us ten

steps to a new you. It makes sense—the kind of people who would try a new religion are likely the same kind of people who pursue self-improvement.)

I paused on the eight limbs, thinking they might contain the prescriptive information I sought. They looked more concrete. I found a cracker in my purse and gave it to Lucy to gnaw on.

The first limb was composed of the yamas, which were the ethical guidelines of yoga: non-harming, non-lying, non-stealing, sexual abstinence, non-greediness. All of these seemed doable and reasonable, except of course the one that was totally out of the question. I had a moment's pause—why should I even consider exploring a religion that asked me to do something I would never do?

The second limb was the niyamas, which were more devotional: purity, contentment, austerity, self-study, and surrender to god. The third limb was asana; the fourth pranayama, the yoga of breath. The fifth was pratyahara, the inward-turning that Fran had tried to teach me; the sixth was dharana, or concentration. The seventh was meditation. And the eighth was samadhi, or ecstasy.

The instructions were laid out before me, but I had no intention of following them. I mean, it was one thing to read about stilling the fluctuations of consciousness but another thing entirely to do it. Beyond that, I liked the fluctuations of consciousness. I made a living off the fluctuations of consciousness. I didn't want to be less conscious. I wanted to be smarter than I was, and maybe to have a cleaning lady. Unconsciousness would not help with either thing.

There was, as always with yoga, that weird disconnect. These looked like rules, but seemed impossible to follow. The eight limbs demanded not to be read but to be studied, and not to be studied but to be lived.

I bought the book anyway, with my Visa card, at the tall wooden counter, where there was a *Far Side* day-by-day calendar. I went back to get my coffee, which I had left on the shelf. Its taste was bitter and so very reassuring. I shifted Lucy from one hip to the other and left.

I was troubled by what I perceived as the inauthentic nature of my yoga practice. I had a feeling that doing yoga in a class, without knowing the philosophic and historical underpinnings, made me kind of a jerk. I had begun to notice that I felt guilt whenever I met a person of Indian descent.

I was, after all, a book critic. I needed more information by means of the printed word, which was my means of choice.

I read more about Patanjali, about whom little is known. He's usually referred to as a sage, which makes him sound like an avatar in a role-playing game. His was the earliest text that attempted to compile the teachings of yoga, almost two thousand years ago. Far from inventing yoga, he simply brought together teachings that were already ancient when he wrote them down. *The Yoga Sutras* gave rise to what is sometimes called classical yoga, and sometimes called raja yoga. At any rate, it is the only text that scholars call orthodox.

Patanjali drew on centuries of storytelling and mythologizing, which had slowly coalesced to create the tradition that he codified. These texts weren't somehow labeled "yoga." They were integrated into the massive literature that makes up early Indian culture.

A little research revealed that the earliest text referring to yoga was the Bhagavad Gita. The Gita—as groovy, in-the-know types call it—is but one section of the massive *Mahabharata*, which is said to be the longest epic ever written, though this seems hard to prove. I feel certain that some crazy would-be postal bomber in Wyoming or some hut dweller in the farthest reaches of Greenland has written one longer.

The Bhagavad Gita was easy to find. It was like the books of James Patterson; not something you'd really like to read, but once you had your eye out for it, it was everywhere. I had one on my very own bookshelf. How'd that get there?

The *Mahabharata* tells the story of Arjuna, a warrior who can't quite bring himself to kill anyone. Krishna, who is both Arjuna's charioteer and his god, has a long talk with Arjuna about serving god. The Bhagavad Gita is that conversation. It is also the first time that yoga is explained in any comprehensive way in a text.

Krishna explains to Arjuna that yoga is a matter of devotion, and that Arjuna might serve god by killing, since he would be practicing karma, or the yoga of action.

If it seems confusing that yoga, with its tenets of non-harming, might promulgate killing in its original text, well, that's yoga for you. The more I read, the more infinite it seemed. Commodious might be a nice way to put it. All over the map might be more accurate. There were so many historical yogas: hatha yoga, of course, and karma yoga, and raja yoga, bhakti yoga, Jainist yoga, and on and on. I felt hopelessly fettered by my lack of knowledge of Indian history; it seemed impossible to move through yoga's central ideas without it. My confusion was not unique. Even Arjuna says to Krishna, "My mind is in confusion because in thy words I find contradictions."

I read through Krishna and Arjuna's conversation. I read as a child reads a grown-up novel, looking for the sexy bits. I was looking for talk about the poses. This was the part of yoga I knew and understood, the place where I might insert myself into this weird and ancient story. I found nothing. There was a little talk about sitting and about meditation—at least here I could understand what was being discussed. And I found commonsensical elements I could understand. For instance: "Set thy heart upon thy work, but never on its reward. Work not for a reward, but never cease to do thy work." You could do pigeon forever, seeking some ultimate expression of the pose, but was that really the point? Wasn't there something to learn from the mining itself? Wasn't that enough? In fact, wasn't it everything? If you hoped to have perfectly free hips, you were hoping in vain. It was a horizon that you would never come to. Instead, never ceasing, do thy work.

Like a good student, I went next to secondary sources. In fact, I was intimidated by the primary sources. I thought maybe some Western scholars might come at yoga history from an angle I could better understand.

When I tried to figure out which were the most reputable and important yoga books, two names emerged as the leading Western

students of yoga: Mircea Eliade, the Romanian historian, who made a decades-long study of yoga in the first half of the twentieth century; and Georg Feuerstein, a scholar of Hinduism who was nothing if not prolific.

Eliade and Feuerstein led me to a slew of lesser-known scholars, and soon I was up to my eyeballs in complicated strands of Indian history and Hindu philosophy.

And here is what I learned from these scholars: Don't think that because you're doing poses, you're doing yoga. In fact, many Western historians seem positively affronted by the spectacle of white people in their millions practicing asana, and go out of their way to explain that hatha yoga is not at all the same thing as raja yoga.

Raja yoga is the yoga that has been practiced by mainstream Hindus for centuries, with a supple and rigorous theology that has nothing to do with what happens in your local yoga studio. Raja yoga is the attempt to know god, or to abide in perfect consciousness. But who is this god, and what is this consciousness? That is harder to say.

God and the self are easy to understand in Western religion (at least to Westerners). Western religion is determinedly dualistic; there is god, and there is us, and the best we can hope for is to please Him.

There seemed to be some disagreement as to the role of dualism in yoga. On the one hand, yoga is non-dualistic in the sense that god is not there; he is, instead, in here, or, on the other hand, in everything.

There are too many yogas to pinpoint how dualism works in all of them. But in the case of Patanjali's yoga, or classical yoga, or raja yoga, there's a finer point to be made. Dualism does in fact exist—it's the distinction between matter and spirit. This sounds simple, like something your Lutheran pastor might discuss, but becomes less so when you realize that "matter" includes plain old consciousness. Thought. The ego. The mind. Whatever you want to call it. Thinking itself belongs in the same category as other matter. In yoga, matter is any object that pure awareness can rest upon.

Thought itself becomes something that is observed, something to become aware of. In this way, it fulfills the same role as a dog or a cup. Thought must, through practice, be transcended, just like everything

else on earth. This transcendence is the job of the yogi; this is what is meant by knowing god.

At the same time, thought is potentially more disruptive to transcendence than a dog or a cup. Thought is kind of the problem child of yoga. It can obstruct the way. Westerners are comfortable using our minds to understand god; yoga shows us specific ways that our minds prevent us from knowing god.

The texts of yoga are full of categories and explanations for the way the mind and its habits prevent the practitioner from transcending the self. When Patanjali says that yoga is the stilling of the patterns of consciousness, he means that thinking can't help us and might be hurting us.

What I took away from my readings was this: I was, according to these scholars, not doing yoga. I was doing asana, and the origins of that were quite suspect. Over and over I read that mainstream students of yoga in Indian history did not perform asana; that asana was the realm of charlatans, of soldiers of fortune, of outcasts. People who focused on asana were straying from the classical yoga path.

Back on my mat, bent and pinned into pigeon, I wondered: What was I doing, then, laboring in the yoga studio? I thought of Krishna, telling me to set my heart upon my work. Somehow I had to believe that doing some work, in a wrong way, was better than doing no work at all. I was deeply interested in how far I might go in pigeon, how deep the tension was, and whether or not I might release some of that tension. I would keep doing that work.

I didn't know it at the time, but it was at this moment, when I decided that I couldn't be bothered to learn the right way to do yoga but that I would instead continue doing it, following my teacher and doing my work to the best of my ability, that I began to reap the fruits of yoga. Submission, trust, transmission from teacher to student, imperfection, the release of the ego—these were the things that would save me from myself, even if they were as unfamiliar as Krishna with his blue face. You can't go deeper and know what you're doing the whole time.