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BEING IN THE MOMENT: YOGA AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONCENTRATION

by

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B. Sc., McGill University, 2001

THESIS

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If you imagine an aquarium with the sand at the bottom, and you put a stick in and you whirl, you have particles of sand, and you get blurry water - that's more or less everybody's state of mind. You get up in the morning, and you whirl, 'I've got to do this, I've got to do this, I've got to do this'. That's what you're doing, you're whirling. So in your mind, you have all those plans, and people say 'I'm walking in the street and I don't even see who I cross, because I'm planning'. So we live in the past, and the future, and the past and the future. We are hardly present. When you meditate, you remove that stick, and the first thing you see is the momentum. Sometimes it looks worse, because before we weren't looking, and you think, 'oh, I don't want to meditate, because it doesn't work for me.' But it is working, just wait. It slows down, and then the particles start to settle, and if you meditate long enough, the particles completely settle and you get clear water. Then people say, 'I open my eyes, and I see better. I smell better. I have a clear mind.' (Sat-shakti)

Abstract

It is well known within the field of sport psychology that the ability to focus is crucial to performance, however there are relatively few empirical studies that have explored the experience of maintaining concentration or the process of developing a capacity to achieve it. This study explored concentration in terms of its development within the practice of yoga, which is an eastern discipline often used to train concentration. The two objectives of the study were to examine the experience of concentration in advanced yogis, and to explore how they developed this ability to concentrate. Eight participants were selected on the basis of two criteria: they had practiced yoga for a minimum of twenty years, and they were currently maintaining a daily practice. Two one-hour interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format and an interpretational theme analysis was used. The findings that emerged from the interviews were discussed within two main themes: The Nature of Yogic Awareness, and The Practice. It is hoped that the yogis' description of their development of concentration within yoga will help athletes and coaches to better understand the nature of concentration and the ways they could develop this skill.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	4
Acknowledgements.....	5
Table of contents.....	6
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION.....	8
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	12
Evolution of Yoga.....	12
Hatha yoga - the mind-body connection.....	15
Raja yoga - the royal discipline.....	16
Research in Meditation.....	18
Research in Concentration.....	24
Significance of the Study.....	32
Purpose of the Study.....	32
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY.....	33
Research Paradigm	34
Yogi Characteristics.....	34
Interview Component.....	35
Pilot Interviews.....	36
The Researcher.....	37
Data Analysis	37
Procedures.....	38
Trustworthiness.....	39
CHAPTER IV: RESULTS.....	40

The Nature of Yogic Awareness.....	40
Effortless effort - achieving quiet mind through focus.....	42
Witness consciousness – the experience and impact of the quiet mind in meditative awareness.....	54
Panoramic wisdom - the development of insight through self-observation.	63
The Practice.....	80
Sadhana (means of attainment) – tools of the trade.....	80
Steady, constant practice - the necessity for continuous practice.....	85
The importance of continuity – the loss of perspective with deficient practice...	88
Parinam (transformation) – time required for psychological change.....	90
Anusasen (subtle understanding) - discipline through the love of the practice....	92
Atmosphere – environmental factors.....	93
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION	100
Applications.....	107
Limitations of the Study.....	109
Future Directions.....	109
CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION.....	111
REFERENCES.....	112
APPENDICES.....	117
A. Consent Form.....	122
B. Interview Guide.....	125
C. Second Interview Guide.....	126
D. Their Stories.....	127

Introduction

We all spend some portion of every day paying attention to various tasks, objects and events. As we listen to the morning news we pay attention to the voice of the announcer, we focus on the sensation of the razor blade while we shave or we concentrate on the road ahead while we are driving to work. On first glance, the ability to concentrate appears to be a straightforward and ordinary ability. Research, however, has shown that this is often not the case.

In reality, the mind is in a perpetual state of wandering until we set an intention to focus on something or if our mind is called involuntarily to some attractive stimuli (Wegner, 1997). In some instances, maintaining a focused connection seems to be totally effortless (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), while under other circumstances, such as for some athletes during intense competition, staying focused can prove to be a more difficult undertaking (Orlick, 2000; Werthner, 2002; Wertz, 1977). Why is it that we are sometimes unable to apply this skill that we, at least to some degree, practice every single day?

Over the past forty years, the field of psychology has begun to demonstrate the pervasive influence of concentration on psychological function and experience. Within the domain of sport psychology, researchers and sport psychology consultants are very aware of the importance of the skill of focus in performance execution (Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, Medbery, & Peterson, 1999; Kabush, 2001; Orlick, 2002; Ravizza, 1982; Werthner, 2002). It is recognized that the ability to concentrate effectively is closely related to performance excellence as well as to many performance skills such as distraction control, imagery, stress response, and arousal management. It is well known within the field of sport psychology that the ability to focus is crucial to performance and yet there are relatively few empirical studies that have explored the

actual experience of ‘being in the moment’ or the process of developing a capacity to achieve it (Schmid, Peper, & Wilson, 2001).

William James (1952) expanded on two scenarios of concentration in his contrast of passive and voluntary attention. He described passive attention as resulting from some fascinating stimuli or train of thought that, by its nature, calls our interest to it. In comparison, voluntary attention results when we willfully direct our awareness and “...resist the attractions of more potent stimuli and keep our mind occupied with some object...” (James, 1952, p. 272). It is this second category of sustained attention that is relevant to this paper and the regulation of awareness in yoga.

Yoga is a discipline that was established to influence consciousness, as well as increase the ability to concentrate. It originated about 5000 years ago, and it has evolved significantly over the years (Feuerstein, 2001). As a result of this long development and divergence, yoga has become an elusive concept to define. There are several ways in which to describe the practice and, in its broadest sense, it can be referred to as a spiritual discipline (Cope, 1999; Feuerstein, 2001). The direct translation of the word yoga is “to yoke” or join, which alludes to the fundamental purpose of yoga: to transcend the ego and merge with the universal “Self” or God. In his foreword, Ken Wilber (Feuerstein, 2001) elaborates on this application of the concept of yoga in this statement, “When Jesus said, “My yoke is easy,” he meant “My yoga is easy”(p. xiii).

Specifically, yoga refers to the collection of practices described in Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras (Cope, 1999; Govindan, 2000). Within this definition, concentration is one of the central practices of yoga (Farhi, 2000; Feuerstein, 2003; Iyengar, 1979; Yogananda, 1969), and the discipline itself is classically defined to be a “technology to arrive in the present moment” (Farhi,

2000, p. 5). This definition is descriptive of the role that yoga practice plays in allowing the practitioner to develop an ability to direct his or her focus into the 'here and now'. Despite these traditional assertions, there is very little scientific research that examines the relationship between yoga and concentration (Hopkins & Hopkins, 1979; Peck, Kehle, Bray, & Theodore, 2005). However, there are several short-term interventions that have tested the impact of yoga on concentration such as Hopkins and Hopkins' (1979) examination of yoga and concentration in children with education problems. Often these studies have indicated differences, albeit insignificant, between the experimental and control groups. In light of these findings, the present study aims to access those individuals with higher accumulations of yoga practice.

Within the literature on sport psychology, there is a general neglect of eastern philosophies with regard to their influence on performance enhancement. Although yoga is being adopted by many athletes to enhance both physical and mental training (Hollingshead, 2002; Schmid et al., 2001), there is only one study that has explored the impact of yoga on concentration within the competitive sport context (Ravizza, 1982). However, the relative success realized by these applications of yogic practices in performance enhancement supports further investigation. The current exploratory study may prove useful as it comprises a more holistic investigation of yoga and concentration and will hopefully offer a more complete representation of the potential benefits resulting from the practice, as well as the mechanisms through which it operates.

It is well researched within the field of performance enhancement that the ability to focus is a key factor in performing consistently at one's potential (Orlick, 2000), yet there are very few empirical studies that specifically examine the development of concentration in sport (Kabush, 2001; Peper & Schmid, 1983). In addition to this, most interventions applied to focusing within

sport are context dependent (Kabush, 2001; Nideffer & Sagal, 2001; Orlick, 2000; Schmid et al., 2001) and center on sport specific cues and settings. In looking outside of sport, this investigation may discover training methods that might be universally applied to all sport domains as well as within other performance enhancement situations influenced by focus.

Looking at sociological research in sport, there have been numerous accounts of psychological illness within the sporting community related to career-ending injuries and athletic retirement (Denison, 1996; Watson & Nesti, 2005). The resilience and perspective afforded by the regular practice of yoga (Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 1990) might be useful in buffering against traumatic events along with improving performance. In addition to this, it is well known that intrinsic motivation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Deci & Flaste, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Vallerand & Rousseau, 2001), as well as process goals (Burton, Naylor, & Holliday, 2001), learning goals and mastery approach (Dweck & Leggett, 1988) not only foster improved performances, but psychological health and greater enjoyment as well. The philosophy and practice of yoga places emphasis on all of these orientations, and may serve to strengthen them in addition to enhancing the ability to focus.

Given the importance of the skill of concentration for competitive athletes, and given the key role that the skill of concentration plays in the practice of yoga, it is useful to explore what advanced yogis experience as they practice being 'in the moment' and how they have developed this ability to focus. The main objectives of the present study are: (a) to examine the experience of concentration in advanced yogis; and (b) to explore how they developed this ability to concentrate. Hopefully, the findings from this study will help us better understand how to develop the skill of being fully focused, and contribute to the further development of effective interventions in sport and other domains.

Review of literature

Evolution of Yoga

The fundamental purpose of yoga is to transcend the ego and experience the true or universal “Self” (Feuerstein, 2003; Gannon & Life, 2002). This experience varies from person to person, but it is distinguished by a sense of clarity, and connectedness with the universe, as well as being accompanied by a heightened state of well-being (Cope, 1999; Feuerstein, 2001). In a broad sense, the word yoga means “spiritual discipline”, and all of its forms and methods are meant to bring about self-growth and transformation (Feuerstein, 2003; Iyengar, 1979).

Yoga is believed to have grown out of Shamanism and asceticism. The earliest written account of a type of proto-yoga was found within the Vedas, which are four volumes of hymns created by the ancient Indus-Sarasvati civilization. The Rig-Veda, the oldest of the four books, was composed early in the Vedic Age ranging from 4500-2500 B.C.E. (Feuerstein, 2001) and represents the oldest Hindu sacred writings. This early form of yoga originated as a “practice of disciplined introspection, or meditative focusing, in conjunction with sacrificial rituals” (Feuerstein, 2001, p. 27), involving offerings in fire ceremonies. Rigorous mental training was required of those who kept these traditions and this led to the meditative system of yoga that was later developed in the Upanishads, the Bhagavad-Gita and the Yoga Sutras. These texts each hold important information about the practice of yoga, and they also demonstrate significant development and change over the years.

The Upanishads are the second oldest writings, containing about 200 texts that were written over 1500-1000 B.C.E. They formalized the meditative practice of internalized sacrifice (Feuerstein, 2001). The Bhagavad Gita, or the “celestial song” is a dialogue between Lord Krishna and his servant Arjuna. Bhagavan Vyasa recorded this book sometime during the Pre-

Classical or Epic Age during 1000-100 B.C.E. and it puts emphasis on the path of action without attachment (Iyengar, 1979; Sivananda, 1983). Patanjali is believed to have written the Yoga Sutras somewhere between 200-400 A. D. (Govindan, 2000). These sutras, or “threads”, are a structural framework of verses that give instructions for the achievement of liberation through the practice of yoga (Farhi, 2000; Gannon & Life, 2002).

Yoga is not a religion (Feuerstein, 2001; Gannon & Life, 2002; Yogananda, 1969), but its conception and development are intimately connected to the roots of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, and its framework involves their philosophy and cosmology (Feuerstein, 2001; Gannon & Life, 2002). There is a manifestation of yoga within all of these religions and there are similarities among all four practices (Feuerstein, 2001). Hindu Yoga, the most predominant form, represents one of the main philosophical schools of Hinduism, the others being Vedanta, Samkhya, Mimamsa, Nyaya and Vaisesika (Feuerstein, 2003; Gannon & Life, 2002; Iyengar, 1979; Yogananda, 1969). In combination, these schools form a system that assimilates cosmology, logic, ethics, ontology, epistemology and aesthetics (Feuerstein, 2001; Gannon & Life, 2002).

Yoga is a means of achieving spiritual growth, and it necessitates no further commitment from a religious perspective (Feuerstein, 2003; Freeman, 2004). It does not require that one alter his or her faith in order to practice (Yogananda, 1969), and conversely, many Jewish and Christian practitioners find that their involvement in yoga deepens their own personal beliefs (Farhi, 2000; Feuerstein, 2003). Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that similar meditative practices have been implemented in various religions such as Christianity, and Judaism as well as other eastern systems of faith (Benson, 1975; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Zimbardo, 1980). Csikszentmihalyi (1990) states:

This simple truth, that the control of consciousness determines the quality of life has been known for a long time... the Christian Monastic orders perfected various methods for learning how to channel thoughts and desires ... in the east, techniques for achieving control over consciousness proliferated and achieved levels of enormous sophistication. Although quite different from one another in many respects, the yogi disciplines in India, the Taoist approach to life developed in China, and the Zen varieties of Buddhism all seek to free consciousness from the deterministic influences of outside forces, be they biological or social in nature. (p. 20)

In this statement 'outside forces' are taken to be the events or occurrences in our lives that serve to impact our subjective awareness. These are the distractions and disturbances that diminish our ability to regulate our mental processing, as well as our ability to focus.

Yoga has been passed through the centuries by word of mouth (Feuerstein, 2001). This has led to a significant evolution and branching of ideas and methods. There are several distinct approaches within the discipline that represent contrasting practices to achieve enlightenment. Within the Hindu denominations, there are seven important divisions – Raja-Yoga, Hatha-Yoga, Bhakti-Yoga, Mantra-Yoga, Jnana-Yoga, Tantra-Yoga and Karma-Yoga (Feuerstein, 2003; Iyengar, 1979). Hatha yoga places emphasis on bodily preparation for enlightenment. In particular, it accounts for the mind-body interaction. Jnana-Yoga cultivates wisdom or the discernment of reality. Bhakti-Yoga is the practice of love or devotion to God. Karma-Yoga is the path of action without attachment. Mantra-Yoga draws on the application of sound through mantra to attain Self-realization. Tantra-Yoga seeks liberation through the perception of transcendental reality within ritual, visualization and energy work (Feuerstein, 2003; Iyengar, 1979).

Raja-Yoga is likened to be analogous to Patanjali's Yoga Sutras. It is associated with an ideal and "royal" practice of the true devotees (Iyengar, 1979). Patanjali's conventional format has also come to be known as Classical Yoga, named for the period in which it was developed (Feuerstein, 2001; Iyengar, 1979). It should be noted that Raja yoga and Hatha Yoga are complementary and the two practices can be integrated to achieve enlightenment (Iyengar, 1979).

Hatha yoga – the mind-body connection. The presentation given by Swami Vivekananda during the 1893 Columbian Exposition's Parliament of the World's Religions was one of the earliest introductions of yoga to the West (Garrett, 2001). Since then it has become integrated into our society, impacting many individuals within rehabilitation and health promotion settings (Berger & Motl, 2001; Levine, 2000; Wilson, 1985).

One of the most conspicuous forms of yoga is the physical practice central to Hatha Yoga. This form of yoga, based on pranayama (breath-work) and asana (postures), seems to have proven itself to be both a catalyst and an obstacle in promoting Western acceptance – it is attractive to the health enthusiast and incongruous to the spiritual seeker. Although both asana and pranayama are also a necessary element in the holistic practice of Classical Yoga, it must be emphasized that the physical practice is not an integral part of all systems of yoga.

Yoga has penetrated the international mainstream to a great extent as a form of physical therapy and calisthenics, and most of its introduction has occurred within the fitness industry (Feuerstein, 2003). Hatha yoga is what characterizes a typical western yoga class. The postures on which it is based function to strengthen, stretch and cleanse the body (Berch, 1995). Their purpose is to develop physical conditioning, in order to function in support of the mind and spirit in the practice (Iyengar, 1979; Strauss, 2002; Yogananda, 1969).

It is important to also recognize that the postures do not affect the body alone; they are designed to impact the mind as well. Although the relationship of this body-mind communication has not been investigated as comprehensively as its inverse (mind-body) (Watts, 2000), studies have shown that physical activity has beneficial effects on mental health and well-being (Berger & Motl, 2001; Berger & Owen, 1992). In support of this, Berger & Owen (1992) found that both swimmers and yoga participants reported decreased anger, confusion, depression and tension in comparison with a control group. The study looked to verify the psychological impact of Hatha yoga and swimming. It was also suggested that mood alteration might be the result of rhythmical, diaphragmatic breathing rather than strictly a result of the aerobic activity.

The physical system of Hatha yoga also lends a somatic flavor to meditation and self-awareness (Miller, Fletcher & Kabat-Zinn 1995). With practice, body awareness improves, and this shift in focus helps to release mental connections and cultivates associations and acceptance of the body (Garrett 2001). Furthermore, the postures themselves discipline the mind, as they require sustained concentration for balance, body placement and proprioception (Watts, 2000).

Raja yoga – the royal discipline. Since most westerners experience yoga within a physical health practice, it is Hatha yoga that has received the most interest internationally. However, it is not uncommon for the western initiate to be drawn to a deeper commitment that more closely characterizes a combined Hatha and Raja system as he or she comes to experience more and more of the beneficial effects (Farhi, 2000; Feuerstein, 2001; Garrett, 2001). Those who become deeply involved in the community often adopt the lifestyle along with the physical system and it is these types of individuals who have become the focus of the present study.

Within the Sutras, the ashtanga or the “eight limbs” of yoga are the framework of living principles and practices that make up the foundation of yogic existence (Farhi, 2000; Govindan,

2000; Iyengar, 1979). The first of the eight limbs consists of the five Yamas (restraints) - non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, chastity, and non-attachment (Govindan, 2000). The second limb includes the five Niyamas (observances) - purity, contentment, austerity, self-study and surrender to God (Govindan, 2000). These two limbs are concerned with how we treat ourselves and others in our lives and they cultivate harmonious interaction (Farhi, 2000).

The next three limbs are disciplines that sustain the development of transcendence. Asanas are the physical postures, Pranayama is the control of the breath, and Pratyahara is the withdrawal of the senses (Farhi, 2000; Govindan, 2000).

Finally, the last three limbs are Dharana, the practice of concentration, Dhyana, the expansion of concentration into meditation, and Samadhi, which is liberation or cognitive absorption (Govindan, 2000). This final stage is the “experience of consciousness, truth and unutterable joy...the yogi has departed from the material world and is merged in the Eternal” (Iyengar, 1979, p. 52). Cope (1999) offers his personal experience of this phenomenon:

... I was overcome with a feeling of what I can only describe as profound and utter well-being. For no apparent reason, I dropped through some unexpected crack in my ordinary mode of consciousness into a state of “time out of time”. The most mundane moments were infused with the deepest sense of satisfaction. The enchanting perfume of the iris at my feet; the steady hum of farm machinery in the distant field; the cat curled up in the sun, watching; even the rich smell of the paint. It all seemed so completely right. I was utterly OK. More than OK. My senses were alive, and every sight, smell, touch, reverberated with the sublime. I melted into what was. (p. 37)

Although the last three limbs are often closely associated, the latter two are better likened to experiences that develop as a result of sustained practice, rather than actual practices

themselves (Iyengar, 1979). Dharana, the sixth limb, or the practice of concentration, is the primary focus of this study.

It is the final three limbs that are most clearly identifiable with Patanjali's traditional definition of yoga as "the cessation [of identifying with] the fluctuations [arising within] consciousness" (Berch, 1995; Freeman, 2004; Govindan, 2000, p. 2; Yogananda, 1969). In this sense, the practice is a tool that develops the realization that we, our "true Self", are separate and independent from the mind. This may be a pivotal factor in the nature of yogic concentration because it not only trains the ability to focus, but it also has the potential to reveal the true nature of consciousness.

Research in Meditation

As yoga gained influence in the west, the scientific community began to investigate its application to health. One relevant area of research that has grown substantially is the investigative study of the impact of meditation. The varieties of meditative methodologies that exist within the practice of yoga are numerous and highly diverse and as such are difficult to isolate (Benson, 1975; Corby, Roth, Zarccone, & Kopell, 1978). For instance, Transcendental Meditation is actually a very simple form of Mantra-Yoga (Benson, 1975; Feuerstein, 2003). Although meditation is intimately connected to yoga, throughout the scientific literature it has often been studied as an isolated technique apart from yoga (Benson, 1975).

When comparing concentration with meditation, a straightforward analogy is that meditation is the perpetual focusing of attention, or the maintenance of full focus. B. K. S. Iyengar (1979) gives one description of this:

... when the flow of concentration is uninterrupted, the state that arises is dhyana (meditation). As the filament in an electric bulb glows and illumines when there is a

regular uninterrupted current of electricity, the yogi's mind will be illumined by dhyana.
(p. 51)

Meditation is a technique used in the training of concentration. Concentration can be employed momentarily, and most people find it very easy to apply their focus to almost anything for a few seconds. Meditation, however, is a continuous application of concentration, which is qualitatively different and requires repeated practice. It is through this persistence that concentration difficulties might be overcome.

Some researchers believe that concentration is enhanced during meditations that require a continuous focus (Corby et al., 1978; Mikulas, 1987). In his discussion of mindfulness meditation, Kabat-Zinn (1990) highlights this relationship:

In this way you are cultivating your natural ability to concentrate your mind. By repeatedly bringing your attention back to the breath each time it wanders off, concentration builds and deepens, much as muscles develop by repetitively lifting weights. Working regularly with (not struggling against) the resistance of your own mind builds inner strength. (p. 65)

Researchers have defined meditation to be, "a family of techniques which have in common a conscious attempt to focus attention in a nonanalytical way and an attempt not to dwell on discursive, ruminating thought" (Shapiro, 1982, p. 268).

Of all the research performed on meditation, some of the most interesting are the studies that identify the physiological changes that occur in the brain during and in response to meditation (Becker & Shapiro, 1981; Jevning, Anand, Biedebach, & Fernando, 1996; Lutz, Greischar, Rawlings, Ricard, & Davidson, 2004; Taylor, 2002; Travis & Wallace, 1999). For example, when compared with other waking states, EEG recordings show distinctive alterations

during meditation (Davidson et al., 2003; Dunn, Hartigan, & Mikulas 1999; Lutz et al., 1999). Not only does meditation produce short-term alterations, but researchers have also found that these meditation-induced cortical changes may produce long-term cortical changes in advanced practitioners (Lutz et al., 2004). Furthermore, there are findings substantiating that physiological developments, and in particular, those associated with higher meditative states, are slow, and only emerge after many consistent hours of practice (Anand, Chhina, & Singh, 1961; Pascual-Leone, 2000).

It has been hypothesized that during meditation, the brain is highly aroused while maintaining a concomitant low cortical activity (Pascual-Leone, 2000). Some theorists have hypothesized that meditative states are achieved through the training of attentional processes through repeated practice (Pascual-Leone, 2000; Taylor, 2002). These studies provide support for the potential psychological influence of meditation in yoga and may prove to be the underlying physiological expressions of the development of concentration.

There are several studies that examined the impact of meditative practice on attention. Valentine and Sweet (1999) compared the performance of concentration and mindfulness meditators with a control group on a test of attention. The instrument used was the Wilkins' Counting Test, which consists of 12 sets of binaural auditory tones. Participants were required to count the tones. Meditators were recruited from a Buddhist centre and were divided into concentrative versus mindful groups, as well as long- (25 months or more) or short-term (24 months or less) practitioners. They found that meditators performed significantly better than the control group. Furthermore, they found that performance was better with long-term versus short-term meditators, and that mindfulness meditators out-performed concentrative meditators when the test administration conditions were unexpected. Neither of the latter two findings was

significant. This study supports the argument that meditative practice enhances the ability to concentrate. However, there are inherent weaknesses in this study. For example, they do not discuss the frequency with which the meditators practice, an issue that could have the same relevance as duration of practice.

Another study that assessed the effects of meditation on attention was conducted by Rani and Rao (2000). They assessed the impact of transcendental meditation on the ability to regulate attention as well as on perceptual style and cognitive flexibility. They compared the results of a control group with those of a meditation group with 18 months of previous experience. They found that meditators performed significantly better on all three variables when tested directly following meditation. When meditators were tested on ability to regulate attention on a day they did not meditate, no significant differences were found between them and the control group. While supporting the assertion that meditation improves attention regulation this study also raises questions with regard to the nature of the cumulative, stable effect of meditation on attention. Once again, the studies involving meditation offer tentative support for its utility in the training of concentration. Further study will offer more insight into this development.

Within the scientific study of meditation, the body of research conducted using mindfulness-based stress reduction interventions (MBSR) is of great empirical value to the application of yoga as a psychological intervention. Mindfulness has been classically defined as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgementally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p.145). MBSR makes up a large part of the applied research that followed from the exploratory meditative discoveries.

It is worthwhile to underscore the subtle distinction between mindfulness and concentration-based meditation (Baer, 2003; Brown & Ryan, 2004; Dunn et al., 1999; Hayes & Shenk, 2004). Whereas mindfulness cultivates an awareness of inner and outer environment during the direction of attention, concentration-based meditation employs the continual direction of attention on one focal point, without consideration of distractions. Nevertheless, mindfulness and concentration-based meditations are both considered to be valuable, as they both train concentration, which affects the ability to control attention, and they both use active awareness to enhance the perception of reality (Brown & Ryan, 2004).

The subjective practice of mindfulness corresponds closely to the awareness that characterizes the practice of yoga, and although the MBSR was originally adapted from Buddhism (Kabat-Zinn, 2003), the underlying concepts are shared with the philosophy of yoga. For example, non-attachment, part of Patanjali's eight limbs, is a principal requirement of mindfulness. Within the program, it is essential to be engaged in the process, without holding fixed expectations of results or outcome (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Another very important similarity between mindfulness and yoga is that, in both cases, the theoretical teachings are not by themselves sufficient; it is recognized that they are only functional as a complement to the practice (Feuerstein, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 2003). This may be one of the qualities of yoga that holds it within the bounds of esotericism and has acted as a barrier to its acceptance by the general public. Realization and retention of insight requires consistent and accumulated practice.

It is also interesting to note that one of the MBSR program directives is to remind students "of the possibility of not identifying with and getting caught up in the stress of thoughts and other mental activity..." (Miller et al., 1995, p. 197). This is reminiscent of the traditional definition of yoga. Finally, one relationship that can be emphasized is the fact that within the

MBSR program, mindful yoga (postures) is the third component of the meditation training (Kabat-Zinn, 1990).

MBSR has proven itself to be a successful treatment for a broad range of illnesses (Baer, 2003; Grossman et al., 2004; Kabat-Zinn et al., 1992). The program was designed to nurture the positive attributes of the participants and develop their innate capacity for dealing with their problems (Miller et al., 1995), and it has been associated with several mechanisms that enhance mental function and well-being such as positive states of mind (Chang et al., 2004), greater self-actualization and life satisfaction (Brown & Ryan, 2003), and other positive psychological and physical outcomes (Grossman et al., 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 1990).

MBSR was designed with the intention to improve the individual's ability to perceive reality accurately (veridical perception) and as such, improve his assessment of, and control over his environment (Grossman et al., 2004). Much of this enhanced awareness is the result of assessing the validity of one's own thought processes.

There have been many other explanations of the underlying mechanisms leading to positive outcome: mindfulness is believed to dampen the instinctive fight or flight reaction by improving mental stability and allowing effective response (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). It is associated with improved emotional awareness (Brown & Ryan, 2003), it has been suggested to promote desensitization to pain and anxiety, improve equanimity in the face of negative thought, train the relaxation response, teach acceptance and it may impact self-regulatory and coping skills (Baer, 2003; Levine, 2000).

The aspect of meditation that develops veridical perception has close associations with Albert Ellis' Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT). Both models encourage the

development of accurate perceptions and responsibility for problem solving. Ellis, himself, contrasted the many similarities between REBT and Zen meditation (Kwee & Ellis, 1998):

In technical terms of REBT: It is not the Activating event (A) that creates disturbed emotional and behavioural Consequences (C), but largely people's own irrational Beliefs (B). The message that humans are largely responsible for their own emotions and disturbances echos The Buddha's words "It is foolish to see any other person as the cause of our own misery or happiness" (Storig, 1964). (p. 16)

Considering the many similarities between yoga and mediation with the MBSR and REBT therapies, including the considerable success these therapies have had in improving psychological health, it is worthwhile to explore both what advanced yogis are experiencing when they are 'in the moment' or a state of pure awareness, and how they have developed that expertise, as well as reflect on the potential application of yoga to the domain of sport psychology and performance excellence.

Research in Concentration

In comparison with the amount of research that investigates meditative states (Abbott, 1996; Benson, 1975; Kabat-Zinn, 2003), there is much less that examines the role of concentration either in yoga, or in sport (Hopkins & Hopkins, 1979; Peck et al., 2005; Ravizza, 1982).

Mikulas (1987) defines concentration as, "the ability to hold the mind where we want without it running off" (p. 45). Within eastern literature on the effects and practice of yoga, concentration is considered to be the "holding of the mind in motionless state" (*Tri-Shikhi-Brahmana-Upanishad*, Feuerstein, 2001, p. 250). The traditional technique often used to exercise concentration in yoga is to select an object on which to focus, such as the physiological

sensations of the breath, or a chosen deity or concept, and to maintain the attention on this object (Feuerstein, 2001; Iyengar, 1979; Levine, 2000).

Ravizza (1982) examined the relationship between Hatha yoga and gymnastics in order to identify strategies that could be used to improve concentration in gymnastic performance. Using interviews with competitive gymnasts and the journal accounts of yoga students, he explored the similarities between the experience of gymnastic training and the practice of Hatha yoga. Within the study he discussed several aspects such as exploring the edge of physical aptitudes, maintaining awareness in the present moment, and the experience of total immersion that were integral to both activities. Ravizza (1982) also employed several techniques derived from eastern disciplines to develop the skill of concentration with his athletes. For example, he applied the yogic practice of watching the breath as a tool to redirect focus to the present moment and found that this helped the gymnasts in their development of concentration.

In another study within the sport and physical activity field, researchers compared the effects of yoga with the effects of a moderately strenuous gross motor activity on the activity level and concentration of elementary school children with educational problems (Hopkins & Hopkins, 1992). This study used a within-subject design with three baselines alternating between yoga and exercise treatment. They also formed two groups of matched subjects and reversed the treatment order between them in order to reduce test effects. Participant concentration was measured using an alphabetic coding task throughout the experiment. Although participant scores were higher following yoga treatment, they were not significantly higher than scores following the exercise treatment. This study did not report times of testing in relation to treatment or the duration of the intervention, so it is difficult to interpret the results. At best, it

offers tentative support for the potential of yoga as an effective intervention for students with learning difficulties.

Another study that used yoga as an intervention to improve attention in school children was conducted by Peck et al. (2005). After a three-week intervention of practicing yoga, the authors found an improvement in the children's amount of time spent attending to the teacher or assignment.

These three studies begin to demonstrate support for the potential application of yoga to the improvement of attention and concentration. However, more research is necessary in order to identify the impact of yoga on concentration in school or sport settings.

Typically, in sport and physical activity interventions, the mental effects of yoga have been utilized as a relaxation and stress management technique, rather than to enhance focus (Berger & Motl, 2001; Berger & Owen, 1992; Pasek & Daniel, 1984; Telles & Srinivas, 1998). This type of investigation that examines stress reduction has also been applied using strictly meditative interventions (Griffiths, Steel, Vaccaro, & Karpman, 1981; Hall & Hardy, 1991).

In reflecting on sport and its potential use of yoga as a way to train concentration, it is worth noting the paradox that exists between the role and importance of performance outcomes in sport and the development and maintenance of a present focus. One of the consequences of mentally attending to outcome goals and success is to actually lose a focused connection with the task at hand. Eckhart Tolle (1997) elaborates on this phenomenon:

If you then become excessively focused on the goal, perhaps because you are seeking happiness, fulfillment, or a more complete sense of self in it, the Now is no longer honored. It becomes a mere stepping stone to the future, with no intrinsic value. (p. 48)

This inconsistency is very familiar to sports psychologists (Gould et al., 1999; Orlick, 2000; Ravizza, 2002; Werthner, 2002). In the field of competitive sports, where winning is one of the key objectives, it is hard work to stay in the moment and not get distracted by the potential outcome. It may prove useful to apply Eastern principles to the pursuit of external rewards because these principles are fundamentally based on liberation from those desires. A dramatic example of the reversal of this relationship in Eastern perspective is demonstrated in Herrigel's (1989) application of archery to Zen:

...archery can in no circumstances mean accomplishing anything outwardly with bow and arrow, but only inwardly, with oneself. Bow and arrow are only a pretext for something that could just as well happen without them, only the way to a goal, not the goal itself..." (p. 7)

Herrigel (1989) would argue that it is the sport that is used to discipline the mind to let go of ego, mood fluctuations and attachments rather than the mind being disciplined to achieve in sport.

Within the field of psychology, there is a growing body of knowledge that reveals the importance of concentration in well-being and performance (Boyd-Wilson, Walkley, & McClure, 2002; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Maddux, 1997; Maslow, 1968; Maslow, 1976; Orlick, 2000; Ravizza, 1982; Werthner, 2002; Wertz, 1977). A few researchers involved in performance enhancement (Ravizza, 1982; Wertz, 1977) have acknowledged the potential utility of the eastern philosophies to enhance athlete motivation, preparation and satisfaction. In particular, Ravizza's (2002) integrated existential framework realizes the spirit behind the teachings and emphasizes present focus, responsibility, acceptance and transcending the ego. One practice he

develops with his athletes is a balanced orientation toward process and outcome goals in order to enhance present awareness (Ravizza, 2002):

Mastery of a performance requires the athlete to be in the present moment, yet some of their consciousness goes to anticipating and setting up the next move... We must be here, but we are always moving and growing toward an objective... finding that balance between process and outcome is what helps the athlete achieve excellence. (p.12)

Another development of note in the field of sport psychology is the work being carried out by Dr. Terry Orlick. He has devised a multitude of exercises for athletes to train concentration (Orlick, 2000). For instance to practice channeling focus, he suggests the following:

Sit quietly, relax your breathing, and focus on listening to something like the voices of birds, the wind, the leaves, or other sounds that you hear around you right now. Get absorbed in one of those sounds; then let it fade away by absorbing yourself in another sound. (p. 54)

Many of these techniques share similarities with mindfulness interventions, (Kabat-Zinn, 1990) and yogic teachings (Govindan, 2000). Orlick has also identified the connection between focus and well-being (Orlick, 2000; Orlick, 2002), recognizing that focus is an ability that can be developed in order to experience life to the fullest. His Positive Living Skills Program (Orlick, 2002) was developed from this work and it has previously demonstrated its efficacy with various youth populations.

The research that associates the ability to focus with subjective well-being has been taken up by a number of theorists who endorse the eudaimonic approach (Boyd-Wilson et al., 2002; Maslow, 1968; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Ryan and Deci (2001) define eudaimonism as “the belief

that well-being consists of fulfilling one's daimon or true nature" (p. 143). This perspective associates self-growth, actualization and focused engagement with the development of subjective well-being. Within this perspective, Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi has thoroughly examined the notion of well-being and full focus and has formulated the concept of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Flow is defined as, "a particular kind of experience that is so engrossing and enjoyable that it becomes autotelic, that is, worth doing for its own sake even though it may have no consequences whatsoever" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999, p. 824). Csikszentmihalyi has found that there are several integral features that are consistently demonstrated during the experience of flow such as concentration on the task at hand, loss of self-consciousness, transformation of time and the merging of awareness (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). Many of these characteristics of flow are similar to the states of consciousness within the practice of yoga.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) also made the connection between flow and yoga and suggested that yoga may prove to be an effective way to facilitate the flow experience:

... the similarities between yoga and flow are extremely strong, in fact it makes sense to think of yoga as a thoroughly planned flow activity. Both try to achieve a joyous, self-forgetful involvement through concentration which in turn is made possible by a discipline of the body" (p. 105).

He further recognizes that one of the fundamental objectives of yoga is to develop control over consciousness and he goes on to say that people who make a conscious effort to manage their awareness often lead more enjoyable lives (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). This statement has been supported by empirical findings that have associated mindfulness with increased autonomy and lower levels of unpleasant affect (Brown & Ryan, 2003).

Not only has it been suggested that full focus can enhance relationships and work experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), it has also been applied to health promotion and physical activity (Maddux, 1997), in therapeutic settings (Kabat-Zinn, 1994), and as mentioned above, in competitive sport (Orlick, 2000; Ravizza, 2002). In light of these findings, yoga might serve as a potential method to develop concentration abilities in the enhancement of psychological functioning and well-being.

There is very little experimental work that has examined the development of concentration within sport psychology. One study that investigated this phenomenon was conducted by Peper and Schmid (1983) using biofeedback. They used electrodermal activity (EDA) feedback in order to improve concentration in their training program with the United States Rhythmic gymnastics team. During a dyadic distraction exercise they found that using passive attention, athletes learned to control their EDA response.

Another study that has examined the development of concentration was conducted by Danelle Kabush (2001) where she investigated the development of competition focus in elite athletes. In this study she conducted semi-structured interviews with ten national level mountain bike racers in order to explore the development of their ability to focus within their sport. There are several relevant findings in this research. The athletes indicated that they were able to extend the limits of their attention as they became more experienced in their sport. This ability appeared to be related to the automatization of their training. Furthermore, she found that they had developed diverse focusing skills such as cues to guide their attention during races, or preparative interventions in order to resist distractions.

In order to better understand the mechanics of mental control, it is also worth mentioning the body of work involving the theory of ironic processes of mental control (Wegner, 1994). It is

hypothesized that in order to steady the activity of the mind, one utilizes an intentional operating process, as well as an ironic monitoring process (Wegner, 1994). The intentional operator actively orients the mind to preferred mental states while the ironic monitor is sensitive to divergent orientations, signaling when control has lapsed. When mental load is increased, we sometimes have situations where the ironic processor becomes the dominant function and attention is drawn to the stimuli that was to be avoided (Wegner, 1994). This theory has been related to situations in athletics where athletes become focused on ineffective thoughts, such as missing a shot or getting injured (Janelle, 1999).

An argument for the usefulness of yoga as an intervention in sport, aside from its potential to increase the ability to concentrate, is that it may serve to enhance the well-being of the athletes. As with any other field, there are situation specific stressors that may lead to psychological illness within competitive sport (Denison, 1996; Watson & Nesti, 2005), and it has been suggested that spirituality may serve as a protective mechanism in the resolution of these factors (Ravizza, 2002; Watson & Nesti, 2005). Yoga might be useful as a means to realize this spiritual development as well as to play a role in psychological skills training.

Certainly, meditative practices have been associated with enhanced well-being. For example, several studies conducted by Brown and Ryan (2003) found that individuals who scored high on a mindfulness scale were also more likely to have higher emotional intelligence, have greater life satisfaction, self-actualization, autonomy, competence, relatedness, pleasant affect, self-esteem, positive affectivity, optimism and vitality. This study was correlational and measured mindfulness as having trait-like qualities as opposed to being a modifiable skill.

In other experiments researchers found that mindfulness meditation interventions produced a significant improvement in positive states of mind (Chang et al., 2004), and they

have also found that when compared to controls, meditators scored higher on mental quiet, love and thankfulness, and prayerfulness scales (Gillani & Smith, 2001).

Significance of the Study

Taking into consideration the importance of the skill of concentration in competitive sport, as well as in other performance areas, it is useful to develop a better understanding of the nature of concentration. Given the research to date that has examined the phenomenon of yoga and the effect of yoga on concentration, it is worthwhile to explore the experiences of advanced yogis from their own perspective in order to discover the meanings and interpretations they derive from their practice. As well, the application of yoga to sport may serve a dual purpose: it may potentially help in refining mental skills training for sport, as well as promoting health and well-being.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways that experienced yogis perceive concentration, and to examine their reflections on how they have developed this ability over time. It was assumed that those who are advanced in their practice would have a great deal of insight to share on what exactly they are experiencing as they focus and how they have developed this skill.

Specifically, the study was guided by the following questions: (a) Within their practice of yoga, what do advanced yogis experience, in terms of concentration? (b) How has their ability to concentrate developed over time?

Methodology

According to traditional literature, the practice of yoga exhibits two characteristics that have been important considerations in both the design of this study and the selection of the participants. The first feature is the length of the development interval. Traditional literature describes the mental development in yoga as a slow progression and scientific research substantiates this claim (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Davidson, 2002; Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Lutz et al., 2004; Pascual-Leone, 2000). It is argued that one cannot derive significant benefit from the practice without investing a substantial commitment of time. Furthermore, this discipline must be maintained, otherwise the practitioner will lose the aptitude (Grossman et al., 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 2003). In response to these characteristics, only yogis with a significant level of practice have been selected.

The second aspect of yoga that affected the design of the present study is that it is not possible to intellectualize the phenomenology of yoga, the practice must be experienced to be appreciated (Feuerstein, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 2003). If it were the case that the practice could be learned through explicit study, then yoga would be about reading and memorizing the philosophy. In order to account for this, yogis who were selected for this study were required to be maintaining their practice in order to be experiencing the influence of meditative practice at the time of the study. Furthermore, as the researcher, I have observed several practical trainings in order to familiarize myself with the perspective of the yogis.

A semi-structured interview was the instrument used for this investigation. It was hoped that the experiences of the yoga practitioners would be developed and understood through the exploratory nature of the interview. The methodology was also tailored to the research questions regarding the development and impact of concentration in yoga as it allowed an exploration of

the years of practice and the developmental process, along with an exploration of the full experience and individual perceptions of each yogi.

Research Paradigm

This study is guided by a constructivist perspective, a research paradigm that assumes that knowledge is constructed through the interaction between human consciousness and the object of study (Crotty, 1998). The goal of inquiry within a constructivist paradigm is to discover “the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it” (Schwandt, 1994, p. 118). In this paradigm, multiple relevant realities are constructed based on the experiences of the individual. The quality of data collected depends on the amount of information available to the constructor as well as the level of sophistication with which he or she can deal with this information (Schwandt, 1994).

The implication is that the findings have been created through the interaction between the yogi and myself, as researcher (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Since the investigation was carried out through exploratory interviews, the individual account of each yogi was actively constructed through dialogue with the interviewer. In this dialectic exploration, I have attempted to gain a better understanding of the experience and development of yogic concentration from those who have truly experienced it.

Yogi Characteristics

Purposeful sampling was used in order to access individuals who had practiced yoga for many years. In addition to this, snowball sampling was also used with certain yogis. Eight yogis were selected who met the following two conditions:

- had maintained a dedicated practice over a minimum of 20 years

- were currently maintaining a dedicated practice (practicing a minimum of 45 minutes most days, approximately 6 out of 7 days per week)

I also advertised through a recruitment posting at a yoga centre in the United States.

Focus was placed on the recruitment of workshop leaders, and permanent staff of the centre. I also sought interviews and references from personal contacts in local Ottawa yoga centres.

All of the yogis that were selected had been practicing almost everyday for more than 20 years, and many had been involved in the practice for 30 years or more. The youngest yogi was 29 at the time of the interview, with the other seven yogis ranging from 40-60 years of age. Five of the yogis were men, and three were women. Six of the yogis were Canadian (one had recently immigrated from India), and two were American. Many of them were professionals as well as yoga teachers. Amongst them was a psychotherapist, a medical doctor, a lawyer, a high-level manager in government, and two writers. Two of the yogis had PhDs in the study of eastern philosophy and two of the yogis ran their own yoga studios.

Interview Component

Following the suggestion of Lincoln and Guba (1985), “the unstructured interview is the mode of choice when the interviewer *does not know what he or she doesn’t know*” (p. 269), interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format. This permitted flexibility in the conversation, broadened the scope of the interview and allowed concepts to emerge from the dialogue between myself and the yogis (Ivey & Ivey, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Spradley, 1979). Due to the tacit nature of the subject matter, it was hoped that this flexibility would allow for the discovery of serendipitous findings during the interview (Ivey & Ivey, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Furthermore, the interview structure was sequential in that early questions focused on “grand tour” aspects (Spradley, 1979) and rapport development (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and

gradually, later questions narrowed in focus to the specifics of the yogis' experiences and reflections.

In preparation for this research, I have taken a counseling course to develop my interviewing skills and I have committed many hours to the practical application of these skills, including conducting pilot interviews. Each yogi was interviewed twice, and the interview guides used are provided in Appendices B and C. Each session lasted for approximately one hour, but time limits were flexible and often the first meeting lasted longer than one hour. In the second interview, I hoped to access knowledge the yogis gained from reflection on the content of the first interview. Both interviews were tape-recorded and transcripts and audio recordings have been kept confidential. Each yogi has been coded as a pseudonym in order to ensure anonymity.

Pilot Interviews

Pilot interviews were conducted with five individuals in order to determine strategies that would best reveal the yogi's knowledge. The average accumulated practice amongst these individuals was approximately five years, and all interviews were conducted over a one-hour period. These pilot interviews contributed to the development of the interview guides in Appendices B and C.

There were several beneficial findings that emerged from the pilot interviews. Each individual's subjective experience of the deeper meditative states was seemingly quite unique. Each yogi had diversified their practice in very personal ways; while some focused more on meditation or mantra, others had practiced mainly on posture or breath-work. In addition, the postures, or the physical practice, seemed to act as a preparatory ritual that complimented meditation. The yogis indicated that the postures facilitated states of mental and physical relaxation and assisted in achieving focus in their practices.

The Researcher

At the time of completing this thesis, I will have practiced yoga and meditation for three years and will have been actively teaching for two years. This experience helped in facilitating the communication between the yogis and myself, particularly in discussing the tacit knowledge developed within the discipline (Ivey & Ivey, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Spradley, 1979). In preparation, I also maintained a journal of my own process of concentration development as I participated in a one-month intensive volunteering commitment at a yoga ashram. This journal was used as a tool for developing my own insight with regard to the subjective impact of dedicated practice, as well as serving as a resource to facilitate the development of interview questions.

Although my understanding of yoga and concentration may be facilitated by my own practice and theoretical background (Abbott, 1996), in a conventional sense, this might also be considered a bias. However, other researchers would consider it a source of strength (Hannabus, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 1996; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Van Maanen, 1988), and in support of this, Maxwell (1996) argues that, “Separating your research from other aspects of your life cuts you off from a major source of insights, hypotheses and validity checks” (p. 28).

Data Analysis

All of the interviews were transcribed verbatim and the transcripts were reviewed by the yogis to ensure authenticity. An interpretational theme analysis was used in order to make sense of what the eight yogis were saying about their personal experiences of practicing yoga for many years. As suggested by Cote, Salmela and Baria (1993), the themes and sub-themes were developed inductively based on the patterns found within the data. The categories that emerged

were eventually able to illuminate the similarities common to the yogis as well as the uniqueness of each yogis' experiences and learning with regard to concentration.

Procedures

As an active member of the yoga community in the Ottawa area, I networked in order to gain access to individuals who met the criteria necessary for this study. I also sought personal referrals in order to identify individuals who might be willing to participate.

Once the yogis had shown interest in the study I contacted them and briefed them on the purpose of the study as well as the interview procedure. I obtained informed consent prior to the first interview, and I recorded each discussion. I scheduled the follow-up interviews between 1 week and 2 months later, and when these were completed, the recordings were transcribed and emailed out to the yogis for review.

Once yogi approval was received, I analyzed the transcriptions with the intention to provide an integral portrayal of the development and experience of each individual within their own practice. Throughout the transcription process, I kept detailed notes in order to keep track of recurring themes, as well as concepts and processes that were emphasized by the yogis. I also kept a record of my thoughts with regard to the importance and relationships between these ideas.

Once the transcripts were completed, I read through them and highlighted important ideas. I labeled each yogi's interview under a distinctive font in order to identify the data. Upon re-reading, I colour-coded highlighted areas based on the similarity of ideas. When these had been sufficiently isolated, I reorganized the transcripts into themes which best represented the groups of ideas.

In order to provide clarity, I structured the themes and sub-themes to help illuminate their interrelatedness. The two main themes divided the information into functional groups involved with phenomenological awareness, and practical development. I performed all of the data analysis using electronic copies of the data within Microsoft Word. Multiple files were used in order to organize themes and sub-themes.

Finally, I removed all identifying information from the text in order to protect the identities of the yogis involved. Each yogi was provided with the opportunity to choose a pseudonym. If they opted not to choose one, I assigned one for them.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest four separate criteria in the evaluation of qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. I attempted to strengthen the integrity of this exploration by maintaining transparency throughout. My role as researcher has been acknowledged explicitly and procedural strategies such as method of recruitment and analysis have been documented in detail. Credibility was addressed by using member-checks to verify authenticity of the interview transcriptions. Furthermore, to further reinforce credibility, the preliminary pilot studies guided the development of the focus for the interview questions. Transferability was established through a thick description of context and subjective experience within the text. In order to strengthen dependability, I kept an in-depth, daily journal while I was conducting pilot interviews at the yoga ashram. I also kept extensive notes on my own insights and reflections regarding the interviews throughout the data collection process.

Results

In this study, I have tried to provide a forum for these eight advanced yogis to describe, in their own voice, what happens to them in their practice. In so-doing, I am hopefully illustrating both the richness of their experiences, and the meaning yoga has for them.

The findings that emerged from the interviews were discussed within two main themes which reveal the commonalities and differences amongst the eight yogis. The first theme, The Nature of Yogic Awareness, looks at the impact of the practice and includes the many aspects of the meditative awareness experienced within the practice. This theme includes three sub-themes: Effortless effort, the mechanics of focus; Witness consciousness, the experience of the quiet mind; and Panoramic wisdom, the development of insight through self-observation.

The second theme, The Practice, looks at the details of the progression and development integral to the practice of yoga. It includes six sub-themes that cover developmental factors including: the training methods involved (Sadhana), the necessity for continuous practice (Steady, constant practice), the consequences of inconsistent training (The importance of continuity), the time required for change (Parinam), the love of the practice (Anusasen), and influential factors, such as social climate and lifestyle (Atmosphere).

The Nature of Yogic Awareness

The first subsection within this theme, Effortless effort, discusses how the yogis are able to achieve quiet mind through the consistent application of focus. It examines the way the yogis experience concentration and the subtleties they described that are necessary to maintain their focus. Specifically it explores the necessity of balanced effort in directing attentional focus; the yogis all used a dynamic combination of active attention and passive awareness to prolong focus.

The second subsection, Witness consciousness, explores the awareness that is experienced when the mind is quiet. It begins answering the questions: Once the yogis had developed the ability to focus long enough to experience their own awareness empty of thought, what then were they experiencing? How did this affect them? What did this mean to them?

Finally, the third subsection, Panoramic wisdom, examines the insights the yogis derived from observing their own awareness, both in- and outside of their formal yoga practice. This section illuminates the knowledge the yogis derived through learning from self-observation.



Figure 1. The relationships between the two main themes and the three subsections in the Nature of Yogic Awareness.

In Figure 1, I have attempted to visually show the relationship between the two main themes of this study (The Nature of Yogic Awareness and The Practice), as well as the three sub areas involved with awareness within the practice (Effortless effort, Witness consciousness and Panoramic wisdom). The arrows indicate the direct relationship between the development of regular, on-going practice and the acquisition of the ability to focus. The arrows also indicate the cyclical nature of the development of concentration with both the experience of witness consciousness and development of wisdom. The development of concentration is what allows access to the altered state of awareness that leads to a changed perspective of the nature of our existence (Witness consciousness). Furthermore, the continuous practice of focus allowed the yogis to learn from introspective observation (Panoramic wisdom).

In addition to the influence of concentration on both of these stages (Witness consciousness and Panoramic wisdom), we can see reciprocal relationships as well. Improved cognitive health and awareness increases the potential for clarity of perception and emotional stability which may not directly influence concentration, but would make the practitioner more resilient to anxiety and less vulnerable to psychological distractions. Both of these practices together lead to increased veridical perception, decreased reactivity and higher awareness of self and others. All of these skills again lead back to improved concentration through psychological resilience, improved cognitive control and perceptual accuracy and efficiency.

Effortless effort - achieving quiet mind through focus. It is important to talk about how the yogis were able to achieve mental quiet through the application of sustained concentration. As previously mentioned, one of the main practices in yoga is to bring the mind to stillness. In order to achieve this, the tendency for the mind to wander must be overcome. The yogis said they accomplished this through persistently directing their attention to a chosen focal point. The

yogis felt that through repeated, gentle pressure, the mind's resistance is worn down, and the focus is retained without additional effort. For the most part, the yogis attributed their success in attaining mental stillness to achieving a balanced effort in their training.

Many of the yogis talked about maintaining an intentional balance between effort and effortlessness in order to maintain their attention within their practice. They felt they could not force this awareness of continuous focus; they had to let it happen.

You're stepping into a stream between doing and non-doing, to be simple. It really is something where, the more you try to do it, the farther it gets away from you, it slips away. In yoga there's this contradiction between effort and releasing, and the focus and yet not a focus, that takes you out of the centre. So it's like a focus of non-focus. All of those contradictions sort of meld together. The TM people used to call it a relaxed awareness or something, but it's very much taking those two concepts together, and you actually do both at the same time. In doing that, something completely new emerges. It's got to be somehow that effort, and release all happening at the same time. That's what I think the ideal is in yogic concentration. Moving away from the black and the white, the either, or, it's either this or it's that, and it's opening both those things, and finding that state, being in that state and staying in that state. (Ganesh)

It takes time to undo that judgment, to undo the concept of struggle - that to concentrate, you have to frown. It's gentleness, and so understanding this then we don't judge, we just apply ourselves. (Sat-shakti)

It's kind of like a process [focused connection in the practice] that goes along without a lot of judgment and stoppage. Your awareness is engaged in all of this [performing the

flow of postures], but it's not a process where you're having to bring your mind back to the task, it just kind of happens, because you're fully present. (Vidya)

Another important point the yogis make is that this balanced, focused connection brings them to a new state that is qualitatively different from directed intentional concentration. It is a more meditative state. The yogis felt that they could not enter this state intentionally, but that they could open themselves up to the possibility of it happening through continually practicing this balanced focus.

[Within the practice of meditation] there is nothing to do there, there is only experiencing. We are always doing things all the time. Everyone is teaching about how to do something, in school, and with the parents, everyone is teaching things to do. In that stage, there is nothing to do. I tell my students, 'I am not teaching you to do something, I am teaching you, don't do anything'. So, it is more of an experiential stage, and it's hard to explain. It's just feeling and experiencing... Enlightenment is not like searching. It will happen, it is a happening thing. When someone is searching, it is very hard for them to get enlightened. It's a natural thing to get enlightened. So, that is the thing, it is not necessary when you are doing your practice, automatically it happens without wanting. So, it's good to do the practice with no expectations. (Ananda)

[My experience in a good connected state in yoga is] very one-pointed, I almost immediately block out distracting stimuli. It's extremely pleasant, even blissful. Sometimes I drop in, and sometimes I don't, I have no control over that. But when I do drop in, it's like I'm dropping into an altered state, very quickly at the beginning of my practice... I often practice at my gym which is a very busy place, and about half of the time I will almost immediately drop into a deep state of concentration, even in the midst

of all that distraction. The same thing happens in a yoga class. When I do, it usually lasts the entire practice and it's very, very satisfying, very blissful, and fairly immediate.

(Gautam)

It's almost as though you can describe it as, the breath, the mantra, almost becomes a sort of internal white noise which just subsides and subsides and subsides as you continue to move beyond that...until you basically drop them off. You don't knowingly drop them off, they just drop off by themselves. (Lakshmi)

I'm not really doing anything I think I'm just opening myself up to the possibility of grace so the flow experience can happen ... so I guess I am trained to bring myself to the brink of that. (Saraswati)

One yogi related this lack of control in directing the process of open, focused awareness to the athletic development in the practice of posture.

There are vinyasas [energetic posture transitions] in the ashtanga system [style of yoga], which are quite challenging, and some of the poses are challenging as well. But people are quite drawn to the vinyasas, where you're jumping through or jumping back, and floating and doing these various things that are quite interesting and impressive physically. So if you want that, if you concentrate, and you say, 'I'm really going to get this jump through', or 'I'm going to get this pose', and you're doing the series, 9 times out of 10, that's not the pose you're going to get. The one you're focused on, is not going to happen. It will get better, you'll do it, but it's almost like something builds up like a resistance, because you've got some tension around it. What's always surprised me about the practice is, it's some other pose, that's been really difficult, but you haven't been paying a lot of attention to it, that suddenly pops out of your practice, and you go 'whoa,

where did that come from?' It will be some other time, or it will be almost when you're not thinking. It's like the ego won't be allowed to direct it - to pick your accomplishment. You're going to move through your practice, but it's not going to be just that you want it... I find that's an interesting experience of teaching. Sometimes you'll find you'll be doing something, and it will be totally different than if you're caught up with it in your own practice. It's because there's some open-ness and clarity and directness, and something that clicks. I think it's about the concentration that's required to be on. Because you're in front of a group, and you really are trying to help them, so you're not distracted, you're concentrated in a way that's a giving way, and it just helps somehow, the body lines itself up and everything moves. (Ganesh)

In discussing factors that might create this possibility of continuous focus, the yogis felt that conscious forcing serves to aggravate the process of open awareness, and contributes rather to increased mental stimulation and imbalance. The yogis spoke of just being there, fully present, without reacting to the experience of their internal state; in accepting their experience for what it is, their minds gently became still. This was a skill that they felt needed to be practiced.

Thoughts come from when we react, consciously or unconsciously. When we are not reacting, no thoughts will come, no way. Because the thoughts are our reactions, our actions are from reactions. So, if there is no reaction in the mental level, you are in meditation. When the breathing is even, your mind will be steady automatically. From there comes the bliss, when you are completely harmonized, all of three [body, breath and mind], there is the bliss. For bliss you don't have to do anything. It is already there. We have to be there, and then it happens. It is just like you are developing your ability not to react. It is not just for one day or two days, it takes time to practice developing no-

reaction. [We learn to recognize within ourselves] not only just reacting to others, but reacting to ourselves. When you sit in meditation, then thoughts will start to come, because we are reacting in there, we are fighting inside. When there is no fight, there is union, there is harmony. (Ananda)

The result of this balanced awareness is a quiet mind. Some of the yogis discussed the process behind the achievement of quiet mind and they felt that much of the development is attained through persistence in stabilizing the mind through on-going practice.

If you're on the mantra, what happens, they say ideally is, you get the mantra, and it's like an anchor, it's a focus and then, every now and then, the transcendence happens. This is the TM version of the mantra, you just transcend it. Then there's this moment where you've connected to what they'd say is the Absolute. So, you're not just concentrated on the minutiae, the concentration on the minutiae has blown it open into a broader awareness. Then the mind needs to do something, and so then it will come back [to random internal thought], and you give it the mantra again, or you give it the breath, or you work with the asana, and then it comes back again, more and more. (Ganesh)

The mind still wanders, but it wanders less often. So you stay longer periods of time in a state of good focus, but it also takes less effort to bring the mind back. It's like developing the muscle that brings the mind back to focus. At first, you bring the mind back and it might stay for only an instant. Then you have to bring the mind back and bring the mind back again. But over time, you develop, and then you bring the mind back and it stays on the object of meditation ... It's partly because you start to realize the mechanics of concentration, just as you learn exactly the touch, of the index finger on the

mat in yoga, in that concentration, itself, has a touch. You imagine the mind was a finger tip and you actually place the mind. (Saraswati)

I have a feeling that I'm not doing anything [during a focused connection in the practice]. Rather, that it's doing me, that the practice is actually doing me. I'm not in control of it, it's effortless, and all I'm doing is showing up for it, moment to moment. If I'm doing anything, it's just kind of being there, being present for it. Sometimes I'm savoring the experience of bliss and rapture and delight. But the whole thing about it is the sense of effortlessness and I do have the feeling that you can never predict when it's going to happen and you can never control when it's going to happen, and you have to show up everyday in your practice for it to happen. So, those sessions when that isn't happening are important because they create the possibility of it actually happening. The more I practice, the more it happens, but in those moments, the experience is one of effortlessness, delightful effortlessness. My body feels light, and effortless. There's no force involved in any of it. There's no struggle. There's no resistance. (Gautam)

Many yogis shared their experiences of a quiet mind. The yogis spoke about non-verbal consciousness, and perceptual clarity as being the by-products of this open, mental state.

It happens big-time in meditation retreats, and this is the notion that there can be a mind without verbal thoughts. In one of the meditation retreats that I was on, a long one that I did when I was quite young, we actually took all the labels off all the food in the kitchen and we didn't read or anything, and we didn't talk to each other, and you could get to the point where you could experience the mind without verbal thought and there is a real consciousness there without being full of verbalization.....I think most of us experience our thoughts as at least sentence fragments, and we try to reflect on them and experience

them as verbal thoughts and it's one of the ways that we identify with the mind... But what happens is, [through meditation] the sentences start to become sentence fragments, and then words and then syllables, and then down to a unique sort of descent down below verbalization and then the verbalization is not so much there... So by having moments of non-verbal thought, then you start to recognize the universal mind [the underlying experience of existence intrinsic to all living things]. (Saraswati)

What I really analogize that to [eyes closed, seated meditating to achieve quiet mind], is just getting rid of the static. It's like tuning a radio and very much like the dial doesn't quite get in and then finally when you meditate and you're settled, the dial goes right on the signal and you just got clarity in a mental way. What's striking me about the physical practice [posture] now is that, it's not like that practice [meditation] is coming into the asana practice. Somehow through the physical movement in the practice, there's an outside tuning, there's an outside clarity that comes in. The sky actually looks brighter, there seems like there's more brilliance, or clarity, or lucidity. Like, you look out and there seems to be more shimmering, around the light, everything... So from that point forward, I think that the awareness that causes you to be settled enough that you can actually take in more of your outside environment, which I think, is what awareness does. Instead of being so wrapped up inside our heads, so that we can't even see the car beside us because we're all caught up in our thinking. It allows you to strip that down, and actually just be. Instead of being so engaged in the doing part that you can't see where you are, or who you are, or who else is around or what else is around... So what we're trying to do through our practice is to cause the mind to cease the patterning that it is always, always, always doing, and so when that ceases, it comes to a still point... and all

of a sudden you realize the activity of the mind, through this physical practice has stilled.
(Ganesh)

Attachment is a term the yogis often discussed. Although it is examined more closely in a later section, it is important to note here that the yogis felt it had a considerable effect on concentration. Essentially, the yogis felt that in order to achieve the stillness, the quiet mind, you had to 'let go' of any desire or need to be able to achieve it.

It's more like it gets control over me, that state [quiet mind]. I am able to be in that state, no matter what else is going on. Whereas before, any little thing would throw me right out of itBut I don't try to make it happen in my day to day life, I'm not thinking about it. So it's unintentional in my life, it just comes in...When I stopped being attached to having the experience [meditative awareness], it started happening a lot more too.

Because when I was attached, my mind would try to create it and that just created frustration. I knew that by letting go of attachment, that would happen, but you can't let go of attachment mentally, it's impossible. It was more just a feeling in my self that if I died tomorrow, I've definitely had the experience more than I thought I could. Then as soon as I had that feeling, there was a big letting go, and then it just started coming in more spontaneously in my day to day life, because I wasn't trying anymore. (Chandiran)

One yogi used an anecdote of a marble player to explain effortless concentration and how to achieve it.

This guy was an incredible marble player. He just couldn't miss. So somebody came up and said, 'how do you do that? How do you hit it every time, no matter where you are?', and he said, 'Oh, it's easy. Don't aim.' Don't concentrate then, is really what the message was there ... You've got to not aim, but you've got to be focused, and the concentration

has to be there, but it's got to ride on some other awareness of the field... If you're going to score that 3-point shot at the buzzer, you have to be so present, right now, with that, that there's nothing else that's there. So if you're focusing just so much concentration, and that's all it is and you are tense, then maybe you're just not in the moment enough to actually work with everything else that goes, and that flows, right at that same time.

(Ganesh)

Another yogi made a comparison between the qualities of yogic concentration, with the kind of focus that would be used in a specific task.

The concentration in practice, asana or meditation, is a profound stillness, a profound, deep stillness and the by-product is really bliss and rapture. It can be very profound, complete and utter well-being... Why might that [yogic concentration] be more powerful than any other kinds of concentration, like music or writing? I don't really know why, but my experience is that it is. My experience is that it gives you a much more condensed experience of concentration when you're not trying to think about anything... Because all those other forms of concentration do require some cognitive stuff going on, the music, the writing. The thing about other things I do, swimming laps for example, now I can get very concentrated swimming laps, it doesn't require any cognition particularly, and it's very body oriented... I get very concentrated, I don't try to think about anything, it's more of an expansive state... I think the more purely visceral and physical the practice is, like Classic practice [yoga postures], that is more high-test concentration than the application to writing or music practice. (Gautam)

Some of the yogis speculated on the fact that this ability to focus in meditation may be partly due to a deeper understanding of the essence of concentration and the methods of training effortless focus.

Concentration is not just one thing, concentration is kind of a looming target. It softens and hardens, it's like a lens, that's probably a good way to describe it. It's a lens, a wide angle lens... Instead of just feeling that one is in an onslaught of different things competing for your attention... [where] concentration is something that limits you, that makes you smaller in a sense because you have to bring everything into this one place [the point of focus]. I think that given the constant reinforcement of using the effortless model of concentration, it starts to be the one that you move to more readily, so it becomes your natural state. (Saraswati)

The yogis also spoke of what they experienced as the expansive quality of yogic concentration, in contrast to a focus associated with a specific task. The yogis felt the implications of this are that, in training yogic focus, you are not strengthening the ability to focus, but rather weakening the strength of distractions.

Those concentration components [learning to have a high-quality focus], by all means, will be developed through the yogic practice, but the other side of it that allows it to happen is the tuning of the dial [the elimination of distraction]. It's like not being distracted. Even though you have the ability to look deep like a laser, right into something, if you're constantly pulled out of that, because you're thinking about something else or you're saying 'I've got to get groceries... and I've got to feed my cat' and the mind doesn't have this overall quietude and calmness to it, then it's like the searchlight that we're using to focus isn't going to work. The yoga practice, and the

meditation give it that quietude, so you can take it and it's not obstructed, it's not distracted away, and I think that's very much an allowing, a flowing, a letting go. It's that non-attachment to the outcome. Accessing that ability without all of our western ambition, and ego attachment and achievement orientation, arrogance, and scientific mind that says we understand everything. Trying to access those places [coming from a goal orientation], sometimes that's like, swimming with medieval armor on you...Just dive in this river and flow with it, and boom, there it goes, as we try and pick ourselves up from the bottom. Let's hope we haven't dove in where it's over our head. (Ganesh)

It is also interesting to talk about some of the exceptional talents the yogis seemed to have gained with respect to concentration and quiet mind. Some of the skills mentioned were improved vision and memory, as well as increased mental endurance. All of the yogis attributed these acquisitions to their yogic training.

I sit at this desk, and I have to read long briefs that take two or three hours. I like to put myself in lotus [a pose often used for meditation] because it's amazing how your concentration wakes up, literally, when you lengthen your spine. I'm just beginning to get reading glasses so I can actually refocus my eyes and not use the reading glasses if I'm sitting in lotus and I've actually got the energy circuits bounded up in this position. So I can concentrate then for two hours solid, I can read, read, read, read, read and I can get through it fast. (Ganesh)

My experience is that training the mind to be concentrated, opens us to mental sheaths, the koshas, that we're not ordinarily attuned to. When I'm highly concentrated, like in my writing life, and I'm really living yogic lifestyle, I have mental skills - what we call intuition. I can pose a question to myself, 'where is that book? where is that quote?' I can

go right to the book shelf, pick it out and open to the page. Those are considered Siddhi's or super normal powers in the West. In the East, they're just cause and effects - that's what happens when you train the mind in this way. You become attuned to the more subtle aspects of mental functioning that we're not usually attuned to, and I think that's a very interesting by-product of concentration... The Buddhists got that. One of the higher levels of concentration, one of the higher Janas, the doorway to that, is simply the intention to go there - the power of intention. (Gautam)

Clearly, there is much that can be learned about the dynamic of focus and distraction control through the practice of yoga. But the yogis are interested in more than profound stillness. The training of the mind in yoga is developed for the higher understanding that can be accessed when the mind is still.

Witness consciousness – the experience and impact of the quiet mind in meditative awareness. Yoga was developed as a practice that enables the practitioner to distance themselves from their self-concept as well as their ego. In cultivating a conscious awareness free of mental activity, the strength of identification we typically have with our self-concept is diminished. Traditionally this experience is attributed to being 'the observer' or 'the witness' or the higher 'Self'. The consequence of this new awareness has major implications for the nature of our existence, as well as our relationship to others.

In most Hindu philosophy, this experience is understood to result from the fact that reality is constituted by spiritual and physical elements. It is believed that, though we all have unique qualities related to our physical bodies and minds, these qualities are not an intrinsic part of 'us' as living beings. Any perception of actually 'being' these qualities is thought to be an illusion. Essentially, the premise is that taking on this perspective encourages a lot of healthy

psychological behaviours such as community mindedness, self-acceptance and respect, and more freedom of thought and action (Cope, 1999; Levine, 2000). All of these elements could, in theory, strengthen cognitive function and the ability to focus.

The yogis talked about their understanding of traditional philosophy as well as their own experiences of being 'the witness'.

[During quiet mind we experience] the part of the ego that's actually observing itself and knowing it's own nature. Western psychology calls it the observing ego, but the witness is actually a larger thing than the observing ego. The witness is the seed of what yogi's call Purusha or pure awareness. In the Classical yoga tradition, pure awareness is what emerges from practicing the witness [meditative awareness]. Pure awareness is completely beyond any of the aspects of the phenomenal world which make up either the mind or the body. The witness stands behind all that, inside all that, beyond all that in some sense. (Gautam)

Pure Self is the pure being, its pure existence, so it's underneath 'I' [psychological self]. Creating that separation is core to meditation and to all meditation traditions - they get there one way or another. So it's the Self. It's beyond ego. It's the being the universal, pure life force. Sometimes I think of it in terms of light bulbs. So there are different light bulbs - small, round, colours, and the electricity that runs through has no form. But when it comes through the little round one, or the big red one, it looks small and red, or it looks big and round. But it's really electricity - it's formless. So if you think 'I'm a small little red light', you may have an inferiority complex as long as you're identified with that. When you realize that you're the pure electricity, the light bulb doesn't care, just

absolutely doesn't care. Because it looks at the big one and says, 'Well, you are me'.

(Sat-shakti)

The yogis spoke about how distancing themselves from their ego impacts any ineffective thoughts or behaviours they had related to the preservation of the ego and identity.

You need the ability to separate yourself from yourself, from what you're doing. When you're always caught up and identified only with your thoughts, you don't have the ability to become the observer and step back, and watch the consequence. So it's always experimenting, but in doing that the yoga practice allows you to see yourself apart from yourself, apart from what you say is yourself. Then that allows you to say, 'I don't like that part, what am I doing that for? I think I'll just drop that pattern'. Then you just come more and more onto who you are, bit by bit. (Ganesh)

So if I follow the information that comes in when I'm in that space [meditative awareness], then I'm able to drop into it much more often because I'm just more open and free. It's like my ego mind diminishes, and my higher Self comes through more often. [the ego] will just shut down the process, because as soon as I follow my ego, it constricts my experience...the moment gets constricted. Whereas, if my ego steps aside and something deeper comes through, then the moment opens up so there's more space to be clear on what to do the next moment and the next moment. (Chandiran)

The yogis said the ability to 'let go', or of being able to move to a place of pure awareness freed them from behaving in habitual ways that were in accordance with their self-image - how they thought they were, or how they thought they should be. In so doing, it opened them up to many more possibilities of thinking and behaving, and decreased the strength of their tendencies to serve the ego.

You've got to give up, so that it's not you being the star in your own movie. It's not you controlling the outcome. It's not you being attached to the outcome. The word that sometimes is used is swaha - so be it. (Ganesh)

You don't take things personally, which is my favourite part of it. It's not about me. Or that person's the way they were, with me. So it changes you. (Gautam)

A lot of people love their sorrow. A lot of people love their misery, and they don't want to let go because [without] all of their neuroses, they wouldn't know who they'd be. It's scary to let go of those things that say 'I'm a victim', and 'I'm this way' and 'I'm that way'. (Ganesh)

The yogis also emphasized that these changed perceptions are the direct result of their experience during their practice. They also raise the point that it is an accessible practice for everyone.

So-called spiritual practices are called spiritual practices because, if you do them regularly, they just automatically connect you with spirit. So yoga, tai chi, qi gong, meditation, true prayer from your heart, those are all spiritual practices because they connect me with spirit, and when I'm connected with spirit, then I'm in the vibrational world. That's their purpose, just naturally, automatically. Like anybody who practices yoga everyday, not as exercise, but who has the intention to connect with a deeper part of themselves through the practice, will, eventually get to that place. They have to, because that's what its purpose is. Then, you can bring it into the rest of your life... So it's knowing that exists, and then having the intention to learn how to get there. [It's] like a mysterious pathway, because it's an internal pathway. But everybody can get there through practice. That's my experience anyways... (Chandiran)

The yogis spoke of the idea that we have a sense of existence that is not connected with our psychological self and this is made clearer when you are able to experience the open awareness in meditation.

It's more an experience of a stage, when you are totally connected to yourself, and you forget everything - you are just in the Self. You are in the moment, and the moment is happening in the meditation stage, when you are totally concentrated and the whole of your energy and the whole of your being is moving in one direction... Spiritual practice is not 'I want that' and 'I have that'. Then it's like you are turning on yourself. Then you become two. Then you are not oneness... When there is harmony then you will be just one. So, that happens, it takes time, and it takes a lot of practice, and when you are feeling oneness, it doesn't need to have so much practice then, when you are just in harmony. You keep your practice everyday and you will become harmonized. (Ananda)

The yogis explained that this separation from the ego comes from persistent practice, even if it may not start out that way.

When the ego is not here, thoughts will not come, there is no reaction. The ego creates the reactions, unconsciously or consciously. When we are in that flow [the yoga practice], we have to mend our ego [implied that we need to detach from our ego] to go into the deeper meditation. Otherwise the ego will keep coming back and back and back and back.....[in order to mend the ego] abhyasa-vairagyabhyam tan-nirodhah - practice again and again, purify your body and mind. When you are in that stage, you will reach in the soul stage. When you are aware of the soul, the feeling of the soul, then the ego will mend. ... You learn more, you go in deeper when you are connected to yourself, and then you have more concentration, more joyfulness, more feeling. It's not just going 'ok today

I am doing my asana, and like I am just working on the physical level'. Yoga is deeper than the physical level, it's not just asana. The practice keeps changing, as you become more aware. So practice your asana, your pranayama [until it changes] into the spiritual way, a deeper way, a more connected way. (Ananda)

The yogis said that as human beings, we are all predisposed to an illusion that, as individuals, we are separate rather than connected. They felt that this assumption is created by the way the human mind processes information; it sees stability, and separation, where, in reality there is always change and interaction.

There's the vibrational world [non-physical, spiritual reality] and this world and the way you look at things is totally different in both because in that world everything is connected and in this world everything is disconnected. So it's a totally different perspective..... [Everything in this world] appears [to be disconnected] even though it's not, but it appears that way. So if I don't believe in the vibrational world then it is disconnected psychologically, even though it isn't. Because I'm not perceiving or believing in the vibrations that are connecting everything. (Chandiran)

One of the greatest barriers to reaching this spiritual perspective is the power of the ego. In yogic terms, the ego strives to exist and sets about to dissuade the practice at every opportunity. Many of the yogis related their personal struggles with this aspect of their development. "The ego is very sneaky. Anytime, anywhere it can come, and when it comes, we don't even realize it. Later, you understand, 'oh, that was just my ego.'" (Ananda)

Another yogi offered an analogy of the questing spiritual seeker whose ego convinces him that if the thing he was looking for was right in front of him all along, then he would already have found it. The ego is a major component of the influence of illusion. The moral of the story

is that the seeker can find what she/he is looking for through self-exploration and spiritual practice.

This is the final quote I'll give back to [my yoga teacher]. He says 'people will do pilgrimages around the world, they'll go to Mecca,... but they won't take the pilgrimage into their own body... If you want to hide the best, most valuable precious thing in the world, in the universe, in life, where would you hide it? You would have to hide it where nobody would ever think to look', so he says, 'that would be right under your nose'. You'll go look everywhere else, but you wouldn't come back into the present. You wouldn't come back into your core, and actually say, 'How I find that precious thing is right here, right now.' The way you do that is to practice yoga and meditation until you find something... and that's how the mind plays tricks, and how it won't let you practice. It will do all these sorts of things like, 'oh, I've got to have a coffee, I've got to have a shower, I'm not feeling too well, ... I'll go look after the dog, I'll do these things, and Oh! Now I've got to go to work, oh too bad. I missed it'. I missed that hour and a half of intense physical practice that would have actually maybe brought me to something. I'll keep on doing this other pattern. That's the trick. (Ganesh)

According to the yogis, one of the stronger influences of the ego is the sense of desire to possess things. This desire also applies to wanting to have ownership of the accomplishment in the practice. This is another example about the negative impact of attachment.

Our ego and our mind quite often like to take over and take control. The ego's going to want to own the experience that you've experienced naturally through your practice and say 'I've got that', or 'you've got that', or 'I own this, I did this'. So you've got to try to

get the ego to sit back and just observe it, then place yourself again, squarely back onto the mat, back in that fire of the practice. (Ganesh)

The yogis explained that the realization that the psychological self is an insubstantial concept can be understood through the Buddhist theory of non-existence; there is no inherent being-ness to anything, including our 'selves'.

With Buddhism, you always end up coming to their concept of the void – that all of this is empty of Self, is empty of identity. Like this cup isn't a cup, if you smash it apart, is it still a cup? It really has no independent existence in and of itself. (Ganesh)

One of the yogis provided a powerful example of the experiential awareness of non-existence.

[In one meditation retreat] I had a lot of awareness of dukkha [suffering], I had a lot of awareness of anicca [impermanence], and I had a lot of self-deconstructive kinds of experiences. So I would feel like I was disappearing. Like I would look in the mirror - and see nothing. These were scary experiences. (Gautam)

The yogis also contrasted the Buddhist proposition of emptiness, with the Hindu belief that assumes everything is composed of spirit or God. Once again they described meditations that logically arrive at the conclusion that the true 'Self' cannot be directly associated with anything in the physical world, such as the neti-neti (I-am-not) tradition.

[As] the mind gets more and more focused, it will have a glimpse of the separation between the ego and the Self, that pure Being. That is a practice called Vivekyati and a lot of traditions come from there, such as the neti-neti tradition ... That is like the bridge, from ego mind and duality and ignorance, to the truth. Self and ego mind, are two

internal realities: one is eternally changing, and the other is eternally unchanging. So when my body dies, it will decay, but my pure life essence remains. (Sat-shakti)

In following the belief that we are not separate, the yogis offered an alternative view: the sense of unity. They believed that in our essence we are all the same - we are all one.

The analytical part [of meditation] brings a sense of oneness, compassion, empathy and truth... [You learn about] duality more in a vendantic [related to a branch of Hindu philosophy] way. ... I am separate from you, and so Canada is separate from the States and so there is a boundary there. This is all illusion. We're not separate. We're one universal family... So how often am I connected? Well I can say I'm always connected. But then I will say you're always connected too... [We are] always in a state of peacefulness, and concentration or connectedness. I'm connected to the profound peace inside of me, but that profound peace is inside of you too. (Sat-shakti)

I feel like everyone is my family. I don't feel like I am separate... Just like the whole world is my family, and everywhere I go is good. It's no problem (laughing)... [Since when] I was teaching yoga in the Niketan, about 7 or 8 years ago, I'm always feeling like the whole world is my family. We are different physical bodies, but the consciousness is similar. It is the same energy moving in my body, the same energy moving in your body. Only our ego is making so many boundaries around us. [Now] I go anywhere, and I don't have any problems, and I make people like a part of my family and myself, a part of their family. That's it (laughing). (Ananda)

The yogis explained that the natural extension of experiencing this connectedness with others was to strengthen their ability to be compassionate. They felt that judgment and violence and ignorance were all the result of egotistic tendencies.

From the separation comes egotistic tendencies, and therefore my gain is important even though it may be hurting people. I will use and abuse them for my gain, etc, etc. So this is the mechanism of duality, and it is ignorance. The truth is, if I hurt someone, I hurt myself - there is no way to avoid that... An aware being is fundamentally non-violent because the truth is that we're one life, one existence, one family. There's no room in enlightenment or awareness for violence, violence is ego-mind. So when we transform the ego-mind, we get to a place of awareness. So you will still judge, you will still see good and bad because bad is hurting yourself, and good is healing yourself. But it's not conceptual, it's a direct experience. (Sat-shakti)

Panoramic wisdom - the development of insight through self-observation. The science of yoga and Buddhism is based on thousands of years of phenomenological observations made by monks and yogis within their experience of meditation as well as their self-observation in general. Even today, the yogis in the present study were all contributing to this accumulation of knowledge through their own explorations. This is a fundamental component of yoga.

A major part of meditative practice within yoga is the development of experiential learning through the observation of one's own awareness in the practice. Veridical perception, which is the ability to perceive reality, is continually improved through the reflection on the accuracy of these observations and through persistent reality testing (Grossman et al., 2004). The yogis are continually observing their internal state, and examining their patterns of thoughts, feelings and behaviours. They used this learning to modify their own beliefs and perceptions about themselves and the world. "You get to see how much of the way that we perceive the world is actually our own mind, our own projections onto reality" (Gautam). Through their

practice, all eight of the yogis have been able to cultivate a very sophisticated and accurate understanding of themselves and the nature of the world around them.

The whole shift is toward an engagement with how it is, and not how it should be. Our culture is organized around the ideals we have in our mind about how it should be.

However, you can learn to be with how it is. It doesn't mean you can't make efforts to improve things, but you make those changes and those decisions, not from grasping, or aversion, but from wisdom, from clear seeing, from Prajna, which means panoramic wisdom. You can move beyond that, to a person who's at ease with being themselves, the person who's at ease with being in the world the way it is, without fighting it. You give up the war, the struggle that's always inherent in grasping and aversion. It's a relief to give that up. So this has changed my life. (Gautam)

[Through the practice] you're more egoless. You're more willing to admit, 'ok, I have to grow here or there'. They call it a beginner's mind - I always assume, if someone talks to me, or if I read a book, let me be open-minded about it. The beginner's mind has no rigidity about it. That's the analytical part, where we start to understand where we truly stand. Everything becomes a meditation, and everything becomes interesting. So there's also not as much duality between meditating with eyes closed and talking to someone. (Sat-shakti)

The yogis spoke of how they felt they were able to acquire new, experiential knowledge through self-observation. They explained that, in part, this knowledge acquisition was due to the clarity they gained from the practice. This clarity allowed them to make more accurate observations. Once they were able to diminish the activity of the mind, many of their perceptions came to them more directly from experience, rather than from their reflections on experience.

When your mind gets into a concentrated state, it has glimpses of the truth. As long as the mind is scattered or over-active, or simply active but not focused. It slips away from the truth because it [perceives abstract concepts, symbols and ideas]. It is not really perceiving the truth, as it is. (Sat-shakti)

The yogis felt their perception was less accurate when strong emotions were clouding their vision.

When your mind is extremely anxious, or traumatized, you can't even see what's around you. You can even, project, and imagine things that are not there. You no longer see what's there. Someone in a bad mood may see that everybody's in a bad mood. You know the saying, the colour of your glasses? So if your glasses are grey, then everything is grey. It's sort of the same principle. (Sat-shakti)

It was also interesting to hear the yogis talk about how they felt they were performing little experiments in order to learn more about themselves; using empiricism to develop higher awareness.

It's like experimentation. So, if I have thousands of those little experiments, I finally get to the place where I realize, listening to my inner knowing always works better even if it doesn't seem so in the moment. (Chandiran)

It's like a laboratory, you're always doing your own experiment, and it's [yoga is] not like a religion or dogma that you have to believe... [and this is what the Buddha said] 'If it doesn't fit with your experience, don't buy it'. (Ganesh)

One of the elements the yogis mentioned that is related to being open-minded, were the concepts of belief and faith. They felt it took belief and faith in order to be able to have the courage to take the next step in expanding their awareness.

Most people when they get to a certain point in their practice, they'll pull back, or stop or start thinking a lot, because even getting to the edge of that really open experience is really scary if you don't know what it is. So to me, the experience would be like being on a raft on a really fast river. Then all of a sudden the river's coming to an edge, a waterfall. You can hear it coming and you have two options: to leap out of the raft, or to stay in it. So you would have to be a fool to stay in it, according to my ego. But if I know that the boat's just going to go flying through the air and come down safely, if I knew that 100%, then I'll just hang on and it will be a great ride. If I don't know it, but I've sort of had the experience in the river and I've read that it's ok, and I have faith and trust, because that's what faith and trust is, then I'll close my eyes and hold on, and pray that I don't die. If I do it 2 or 3 times, then my mind will trust it. But it's having enough faith and trust those first few times, because you can't prepare for it, because it's way too intense to prepare for it... it's like going really, really, really, really fast and having faith and trust that when it explodes out I'm not going to be annihilated. (Chandiran)

Some of the other yogis shared their personal experience of becoming fearful in the practice, and how they were able to overcome it through experience.

When I was 15 years old, starting out, it [astral projection – experiencing being outside of the body] frightened me. It really scared me being in that state. I don't know what it was, so it frightened me and I pushed away from it. I wouldn't let myself go into that state for many, many years [because] I was frightened from that initial experience. So that was something to really overcome. With time, the more I practiced, the more I felt at ease, the more I was able to go into it, and it kind of just happened over time. (Lakshmi)

Yoga is based on the accumulation of millennia of ascetics observing and testing; developing knowledge from their own experience, and passing this knowledge on for refinement. The yogis offered their experience of the testing process and how they learned what they know. For example, one of the yogis contrasted the acquisition of physical sensitivity to improving emotional, and psychological sensitivity – by training themselves to recognize and respect their own limits, they learn to do this in the other parts of their life as well.

It [yoga] gives you the tool of reflection.. It's about being true to your body, not forcing a pose. If you're doing a pose and your hamstring starts burning, are you going to force yourself into the pose? Or are you going to listen to the signals being sent and ease off. After living and practicing like that for 10, 20, or 30 years, that gets transposed to be a way of thinking. You know when the alarm signals go when you are in a position of burnout, because of your asana practice, where you observe yourself in the posture and are true to your body. You do the same thing psychologically and emotionally. (Lakshmi)

The yogis also talked about the learning that's going on through self-observation. They discussed what the mechanism of learning might be, as well as the reasoning behind why it may seem to be instantaneous.

There are lots of little stories about sudden little insights, and sudden awakenings, and it happens... But for me it feels like it's much more like it's a continual progression of those lights being turned on. The more and more lights that get turned on, then all of a sudden, you see in the room better where the heck you are. There's insight and then there is time, and then there's more insight and then there is more time, and then it starts to weave together and it just creates a nice life. Then you look back and it's like, 'well, wait a minute, my life is changed'. It really can change. (Ganesh)

Because of the way the brain is constructed, we're pattern making animals. We live by patterns, and I mean Hericlitus said it – character is destiny - your patterns, highly patterned nature of your character leads to a certain outcome. Yogis have found that you can interrupt that. By cultivating witness consciousness, you could see the patterns as they unfold, as they get triggered by stimuli and interrupt them earlier and earlier... It starts in the mind, it starts in mental constructs, it starts in thoughts, and then it moves to actions and behaviours and patterns and character... All the insight practices and meditation practice allow you to see those thoughts before they capture you, before you act on them. So the Tibetan word for meditation is familiarization, you familiarize yourself with the pattern ... It's freeing, it allows you to interrupt those patterns and actually make choices from higher mind, from luminous mind, from prajna – wisdom. (Gautam)

It is experiential. You do need an experience to replace an experience, and the experience that you're replacing it with has to somehow have more positive qualities to it. Like a patterning, because, citta vritti nirodha, that's the second Sutra of Patanjali, which is, yoga is the cessation of the patterning of the consciousness. You just have to stay with it steadily, and I think, just as the body slowly evolves and moves and we create a new pattern both in our brain and our body, then you create a new pattern in your whole consciousness. (Ganesh)

The yogis felt that the knowledge they gained by observing themselves within their daily practice had a major impact on their health and well-being. The yogis described many ways they were able to improve their lives and their psychological health through the learning they acquired

in the practice. The development of a healthy lifestyle, emotional stability, and the cultivation of a non-judgemental attitude were some of the benefits mentioned by the yogis.

It helps you tune in. It helps you have an awareness of other habitual activities that you have that you might not realize were bad habits, but when you're more sensitive, you recognize that, 'yeah, this is not a good habit'. That's an important feature of yoga. It's always struck me as being the antithesis to religion in that I don't think a yoga teacher, an enlightened one, would say to their students, 'you must not drink wine' or 'you must not eat meat', they would just say, 'well, keep practicing and see what happens. Remain open, and if you find that things are distracting you from your practice, well, don't let them do that'. I think that that's a major effect of doing yoga, so that the purification of your habits happens from within. (Vidya)

There's something that starts to happen, you just get a better sense of what's good for you, and what's bad for you, and there's a beautiful phrase, that the Buddha [uses to illustrate]... 'you can fill up a rain barrel, drop by drop with good things or you can fill it up drop by drop with bad things'. So you become much more aware of what you're putting in your life container, what you're putting into your body, and it's harder and harder to put bad things in. You can actually feel it in your practice. Your system gets more and more finely tuned. (Ganesh)

Just as with the other elements of the practice, the yogis felt that it took time to break free from these habits.

We all have a story to tell. So sometimes people have relationship issues, or issues with money, or all sorts of blocks where they just can't get out of situations. So that may take 2 years of meditating to get out of it, but what's 2 years if you get out of it, as opposed to

an entire life enslaved by your habits? Meditation is intense because it transforms. Carl Jung used to say, 'the ones who look without are dreaming, and the ones who look within are awake'. (Sat-shakti)

Getting out of a relationship and out of cigarette smoking was the same thing - there were addictive patterns in both. But I learned so much about the pattern of the mind in an addicted state, ... because your mind will come up with any excuse to figure out how to put that thing in your mouth and light it, even though you know that you've decided not to. (Ganesh)

Some of the yogis used the term intuition in expressing what guided them. In their interpretation, intuition seemed to be the inner sense of what's right for them. This inner sense was created through the practice, developing a greater awareness of themselves and learning to trust this awareness over competing information that might contradict it.

That's where intuition and guidance comes in, because if I only have my mind to guide me, then I'm like a raft in the ocean, without a compass. I'm lost, because there's no way my mind can guide me against what it's learning in the culture. It can try, but it's a losing proposition. So the only way out is either from my intuition or for some spiritual guidance from outside to come in which can only happen if I'm doing some sort of spiritual practice. So the only way out is to do a spiritual practice. Even at the beginning when nothing's changing, except I feel better and usually my habits will change because I feel better, but no new information is coming in, and just doing it long enough until my third eye opens up, until my intuition opens up... [For example] even though everything in my environment is stimulating me to stay on the couch and watch TV, my intuition is saying get up and take a walk. So then that's the first part. Then, do I have the courage to

do it? Because then I'm going against what I know. So if I have the courage to do it, then at least I'll know if it's helpful or not. If I get up and take the walk, when I come back that night or the next day, how I feel will tell me if it was a good idea to take the walk.

(Chandiran)

Another instance where the yogis mentioned that they apply the skill of observation is to their emotional awareness. They spoke of how they could apply their learning to the regulation of their emotions during crises. They talked about being aware of the emotions, allowing them to be, experiencing them fully, and then letting go of them when they pass.

If you're having a day where you're emotionally distraught and you sit there and all you want to do is cry, are you going to fight the crying? No, you'll be able to start meditating by listening, letting go, crying, and then you'll be able to meditate. Same thing for anger. How do you think anger comes in? It comes in continuously. When you're pushing the anger away, you won't be able to meditate. It's when you finally accept the anger, observe it and let it go that you'll be able to continue. That's very much it. The whole practice informs it. (Lakshmi)

The yogis felt that this emotional release promoted stability.

My mother passed two and a half years ago, and that was quite unexpected and I was very close to her. It was probably one of the most challenging things I've had to face in my life, but I still would meditate at least an hour a day and I was able to watch my emotions come and even allow them to come. To really cry with a broken heart, let it go out, and it healed quite quickly. So you allow the emotions. So you may call that unstable because you're crying, but the stability lies in letting go, allowing the emotion to come and go. That freedom from emotion is very healing, we don't own it, we don't judge it,

you just let it be and because of that it will pass much quicker. So then the balance is something that is very, very deep. So when I'm crying, am I balanced? Yes, if I know I have to. (Sat-shakti)

One of the yogis talked about how she applied her practice to the regulation of physical discomfort as well as emotion.

I had a really bad car accident and I couldn't do any other kind of sport for a while and I needed to rebuild my body [so I started swimming and] I did not enjoy it. I hate cold water, and the pool where I was swimming was so cold, I'd turn into an ice cube. But I kept going. First of all, I was pushing away. I'd be turning blue, freezing, and my mind was going 'I hate this, I hate this', and it just sort of happened - the way I meditate just started happening naturally. I noticed after I started getting into better physical shape. At first when you can't control your breathing when you're swimming, it's very hard, but after doing it for a while, my breathing calmed down, I started breathing rhythmically with my movement, and it became physically easier where it wasn't as painful anymore, and as this was happening, I'd fall into meditation mode. The meditation mode helped me calm down, to just accept it.. So the things just fell into place... It just happened, there's no magical formula. When you're a yogi, it becomes such an automatic part of who you are. (Lakshmi)

Through the practice of recognizing, and accepting emotions, these yogis felt they were able to become more comfortable, stable and resilient in their emotional disposition.

[I am able to maintain] a calm demeanor, a calm attitude, and not get into a state of high anxiety about things. I mean I've been that way since the 1970's and I credit yoga with helping me establish that perspective. (Vidya)

In addition to being comfortable with emotions, the yogis also talked a lot about how the practice of yoga enabled them to be less affected by stress.

In medical school, I did a lot of yoga and if I had to go to the emergency room to admit somebody, because I was doing yoga, and not drinking a lot of coffee, I was really clear... Sometimes with the intensity of the energy, like a knife wound or some schizophrenic or something really intense, because I was practicing my breathing, I would go into that contemplative state, and everybody else is freaking out, and I'd just be standing there and say 'well why don't we admit him?' or 'let's get him over in that room'. Inside I felt tension, but at the same time I was in this other state. The only way I could survive in the hospital, since I really hated being there so much, and totally disagreed with almost everything they were doing, was to be really, really relaxed. (Chandiran)

[I] have this practice that allows me to stay relatively calm and focused [during times of stress], and people would comment on it very often. I'd be in the middle of this stuff, and they'd just say, 'I don't know how you can be so patient', because everybody else would be going crazy. I'd just go, 'well you know you've just got to deal with it', and you deal with it. But I put all that down to the practice, just being able to stay clear and focused on where you've got to go, and not get too involved in losing that emotional component that people do. As you go deeper in your asana or meditation practice, more recently, there seems to be a complete relaxation that comes out of it so that the relaxation component makes you feel much clearer. You slow down and then you can come back to what's really on the ground, and what really needs to be focused on. So it's simpler, you just go to where you got to go in what you're doing, and that is the way it feels in daily life, that seems to be the integrative effect. (Ganesh)

You can use meditation to get to a very, very deep place inside of you. So if you think about the ocean, the surface level will be maybe very active. If you go a little lower, you still feel currents. But if you go very deep, you don't even know what's going on on the surface. So when you go very deep into meditation, you can free yourself from superficial mental activity, or even a little bit of the deeper activity. You can really get to a place of deeply balanced mind... Even when there's a huge crisis, I can have a different perspective, which with the years of practice, a certain stability pervades. In Sanskrit it's called Stithi. So there's a fundamental even-ness that's there, no matter what. So if I'm doing my yoga classes, it may be a very harmonious experience, or it may be that someone is upset and somehow disturbs the classes, but in terms of my fundamental being, there's a sense of being more the watcher, and that's where my greatest stability lies. (Sat-shakti)

The yogis also talked about how the practice would sometimes increase emotional intensity. They mentioned that the practice can be much harder in this circumstance.

We'll always try to use our mind to block the emotional intensity. If I start doing meditation or yoga or breathing, then I'm out of my mind [I'm drawn away from mental associations and distractions, and moved more into the present experience], I'm going to feel the emotional intensity much, much more. It's going to make me feel like, 'oh my God, I can't do this, and why did I ever do it? It will always make me feel bad'. It's the emotional intensity that's the hardest part because the practice will always make it more intense at first. But if you persist, then you release it, then you feel better. Emotions are much stronger than thoughts. (Chandiran)

One of the toughest things are emotions, and the tough part is actually appreciating that the practice can help emotional disturbances, our hurt, but sometimes it just doesn't get through it. Like when the emotions are strong; you can sometimes feel very hollow in your practice if you're really, really, really sad, or really, really, really upset. (Ganesh)

Many of these realizations support Buddhist and yogic philosophy. Ahimsa is a central premise of these eastern disciplines, and it refers to the practice of non-violence. A major element of the practice of Ahimsa is the development of a non-judgmental attitude. Many of the yogis offered their experiences in learning to practice this virtue.

When I was a young person, I spent a whole lot more time judging - judging myself, judging my performance, judging the people around me, comparing etc. All that stuff was just always going on, so the states of flow would have to fight their way through all that junk...[In order to overcome this tendency, you must start with becoming] aware of the degree to which we judge. It can come from sitting meditation and watching the flow of thought, and watching a proportion of judging the thoughts. Eventually when you start to have more finesse, you recognize that the judging-thoughts close you down. So you start to realize that it's in your own interests to judge less. It's a matter of being receptive. In judging you've already made a decision about the person or even about your own thoughts. You've already decided, 'that thought is a good thought, that thought is not worthy of me, I want to get rid of that thought, I want to embrace that thought because it would make me more spiritual etc'. It's not necessarily that you completely slice off your rational conscious mind, or your judging mind. [It's] that you're at least willing to wait before you make the judgment. (Saraswati)

We judge according to concepts that we've acquired regarding good and bad. Society teaches us that. We even judge ourselves with meditation. So one day, you feel, you see infinite blue sky, and you see colours, it's beautiful. Those experiences are really remarkable, but they don't last, and it can be very frustrating. So the next day, you see nothing except thoughts, and there is a little bit too many thoughts and you're not comfortable. Then you think, 'oh, I'm not a good meditator', - I judge myself. [Through meditation] we transcend the conceptual mind that's super-imposed by our culture. When you meditate, you get to a place of authenticity which transcends both, it's neither good, nor bad, it's awareness. (Sat-shakti)

Another yogic principle that was discussed at length by the yogis, was Aparigraha or non-attachment. This is a complex concept that refers to the practice of letting go of our desires. This philosophy can be applied in many different ways. Commonly, it is used in situations where we are driven by ambition or striving for success, material belongings, or even relationships. The problem the yogis see with such desires is not so much in being motivated to fulfill them, but rather in believing that once they are attained, these achievements will bring us happiness. The yogis felt that although this might be intuitively obvious to most people, nevertheless, most of us still maintain hope to find happiness in numerous acquisitions such as getting the job, meeting the girl, winning the race, or finishing the project. Typically, they theorized a chain of events, starting out with an object of desire, followed by striving to acquire that object of desire, followed by achieving or failing, and then finding a new object of desire. The yogis recognized that this is an endless cycle that anyone can get caught up in. They realized, through observing the consequences of their own experiences, that this truly is a "fool's errand" (Gautam).

The yogis said a significant part of non-attachment is letting go of the consequences of our actions. This is concerned with effort that is motivated by the desire for a specific result. In practicing aparigraha, these yogis tried to pursue a goal without being preoccupied with the result of their pursuit.

Give up attachment to the outcome of the actions. So you have the intention, you still move through life, whether it's tough or otherwise, with the intention of doing good, but we have to become unattached to whether we actually get it or not, whether we get what we want. (Ganesh)

We've been given a role, and we have to fulfill that role, but we can't become attached to it. You are here as a house holder [a yogi who does not lead an isolated ascetic lifestyle]. You have a role, but you have to detach from the objective. So I open up the exhibit, and some of the panels aren't up. It's not a reflection on me personally, it's just a reflection of what it is. In everyday life, it's about doing the best you can. So that's what I've tried to learn in all my roles in the business world, I try the best I can in getting the stuff done, but I don't identify myself as that amazing manager... I'm not the best anything, I'm just who I am. Because if you're trying to just reach that goal and you're denying your true nature, it's a totally confounded approach. (Lakshmi)

One yogi talked about how this concern with the outcome can result in stress and anxiety. She talked about how this can affect sleeping patterns.

A regular meditator will sleep really well because their mind is freer. [Alternately], if your mind is full of fears and concepts that can't be met, like the concept that 'I should have name and fame', and then you start being hard on yourself, and next thing you

know, you're agitated. Then that night you have a nightmare. But, if you don't care about name and fame, then your mind is in a good place and then you sleep well. (Sat-shakti)

Some yogis explained how they adapted their version of non-attachment from the teachings in the Bhagavad-Gita.

As Krishna says to Arjuna 'give up the fruits of your labor, renounce the fruits of your actions to the divine'. So that's what I am, and will continue to work on, truly. This is so in contradiction with our goal-oriented society. (Lakshmi)

If you give in and don't do anything, it's just nihilism, and so you've got nothing left. You need to have meaning, there has to be some significance. So the teaching is: you have to act from an honorable intention, but you have to give up the fruits of the action. (Ganesh)

The yogis also applied these ideas to the desire for material belongings.

We came here [into this world] with empty hands, and we'll go back with empty hands.

People are working so hard everyday and get stressed out and for what? We came empty handed and we will go empty handed. What are we supposed to bring? (Ananda)

Don't be attached to the car or to the dream of having the car and the lottery, that's the attachment to something unreal, it's not really happiness. So a non-attachment philosophy would be, let that wash by. (Ganesh)

The yogis also discussed the premise of attachment to life itself.

Moksha is the ultimate expression of the yogic experience - you finally are liberated and free from all attachment, including attachment to this life. It's complete enlightenment or freedom and liberation through the practice, and personally I believe a lot of it is slow, slow, slow, slow, steady, steady softening around some of those things that we're

attached to. The ultimate attachment is: how can you actually feel unattached to the very experience that has given you the experience of attachment and non-attachment, which is this life. That's the one, if you can arrive at that point, then you're free. (Ganesh)

The yogis stated that an important implication of letting go is that it releases us from self-inflicted suffering. The yogis not only advocated non-attachment to a desired outcome, but also acceptance of the fact that we don't have as much control over the outcome as we might like to think. Another important point they make is that a big part of becoming unattached is losing the sense of feeling that we deserve a certain result, or that we should get pay-back for our efforts.

What makes life 'tough' is the expectation that if only I do this, then I should be rewarded. If I don't, then there's something wrong with life, it's not me... We control everything, as far as most people are concerned. But really, we don't - we're attached to the idea of control. If you can loosen that up, and not be attached, whoa!!! You step into this universe that just is giving and radiating and giving you a ton of stuff, and is there for that purpose. (Ganesh)

I know experientially that whenever I'm grasping for something, it's going to create suffering for me. Whatever I'm doing, I have to be fulfilled by it intrinsically and not because I'm going to get something out of it. The Buddhists call it the no-gaining idea. As soon as I'm hooked on 'oh, I have to have that', then I've got grasping, and I've got a sense of 'I'. So it's shifted my work life profoundly, so that now my question is not 'What am I going to achieve?' but 'Am I living my calling, my what-I'm-called-to-do? Am I doing my work?' (Gautam)

The Practice

The second major theme that emerged from the interviews with the eight yogis was about how they went about developing their practice. Several elements received particular emphasis: (a) the advantages of the specific methods used (Sadhana), (b) the need to maintain a consistent practice (Steady, constant practice), (c) the issues that arose when practice was irregular (The importance of continuity), (d) the length of time required for psychological change (Parinam), (e) the cultivation of discipline through the love of the practice (Anusasen), and (f) the environmental, social, physiological and psychological elements that became either obstacles or facilitators in the practice (Atmosphere).

Sadhana (means of attainment) – tools of the trade. The yogis utilized many methods in order to train the mind within the practice but there were three that deserve special mention: pranayama (breathwork), pratyahara (withdrawal of the senses) and asanas (postures). These methods of training the mind have been developed over centuries and the yogis offered their personal experiences with these methods.

According to the yogis, the manipulation of the breath was probably the single most significant element they used in their practice. In terms of concentration, the sensations created by the breath are typically used as a kinesthetic focus for the mind. Furthermore, it takes high-quality focus in order to precisely direct the breath flow required for the practice. Finally, in a practical sense, the breath is used to directly regulate the body through the respiratory, circulatory and nervous systems. The yogis felt the breath was one of the main components they used to bring their awareness into the present.

The breath is like a bridge between the body and the mind. The breath is the bridge between you and the Supreme Consciousness [expression used to signify the singular

pure awareness]. So the breath is the key here - the most important thing. So when you harmonize your breath, there is no way the mind can wander. In the Bhagavad-Gita, there is one thing about pranayama, on breathing [he quotes from the Bhagavad-Gita in Sanskrit] – if breathing is imbalanced, or not even, then the mind will wander. Our mind always wanders because in every action we are doing, the breath flow keeps changing. Like, if we are eating, then the breath flow is changing. When we are talking, the breath flow is changing. When we are sleeping, the breath flow is changing. It keeps changing. But yoga is a system to make it even. When it is even, no thoughts will come. (Ananda)

For me, it [meditation] initially begins with a total awareness of the breath, the flow of the breath, the so-hum [mantra representing the breath flow], the inhalation, and the exhalation and after a while, it completely moves beyond that. So the awareness really becomes so deep that it's not on a specific organ or on a specific metabolic movement of sorts, it really goes beyond that. It's an internal awareness, where you no longer are really aware of the body, you're not at all aware of what's around you, you're just aware of your Self. It's beyond words to describe it, but I would say that the last stage before reaching that stage is very much a breath stage, where the only thing that seems to remain is the so-hum of the breath. (Lakshmi)

My breath is the main tool I'm using to deepen the experience. When I can do that, it just lasts longer. It's more open and full, it keeps opening to the next place. (Chandiran)

The physical postures work as a compliment to the breath and these two factors work in unison to influence the internal state of the yogi.

Another contributing factor that aids in the flow of concentration is deep breathing. That helps connect you with what you're doing, helping to regulate your body. Whether you're

trying to move gracefully from one pose to another, or trying to hold the pose, the breathing can be pressed into service to aid either activity. (Vidya)

When you are working on the asanas or pranayama, you are focusing on the moment...

There are three awarenesses: on the physical level, breathing level, and mental level. If you keep connected to the three, there is no way you can go out [of the meditative state of awareness]... On the physical level, the feeling as you're holding the pose, and feeling steady in your pose. Then you come to the breathing. The breathing needs to be deeper and even... Awareness on the physical level, awareness on the breathing level, and awareness on the mental level should be happening into each pose. Then you come into the blissful stage – the union of body, breath and mind - the harmony of the three.

(Ananda)

Another major influence mentioned by the yogis in developing their practice was the withdrawal of the senses (pratyahara). To explain this term, it is useful to look at the way we usually absorb information through the senses. Typically we allow the attention to be attracted to provocative stimuli. The practice of pratyahara is drawing the awareness away from stimulation or sensation and toward stillness or emptiness. In a practical sense this would be facilitative in avoiding potential distractions since it is acting against our instinctive tendency to react to stimuli. Pratyahara was most often mentioned in relation to the visual senses.

The visual focus, in the ashtanga practice anyway, is like a non-focus. The tip of the nose, quite often is one of the main drishti [focus] points, but it's like a soft looking, you don't concentrate like 'oh I can't let my eyes go off the tip of my nose'. It's like a soft, soft, almost non-looking looking. .. it brings the mind back from that static. (Ganesh)

I practice very much, and I even talk with my eyes closed. It comes from the tradition I became involved in [Sivananda] where you try to keep the focus within. I can't reach that point of almost transcending myself if my eyes are open. A lot of my asanas [postures] I do with my eyes closed or downcast, and for me it helps me reach that point. (Lakshmi)

One yogi used an analogy to explain the experience of pratyahara. She described the amount of information that is transmitted through the senses normally versus during the practice of pratyahara. During the withdrawal of the senses, the attentional focus is drawn away from a specific location and receptivity is opened up.

If the drishti is hard, you're emphasizing that direction outward, and you're being pulled to the object of meditation. So if I really focus hard on that tree branch, there's a direction from me to the tree branch. Now if I soften my gaze, the direction of seeing can soften initially and eventually it can be reversed. That's pratyahara, which is withdrawal of the senses, which is one of the whole limbs of yoga. (Saraswati)

Another important element the yogis discussed, that is related to the withdrawal of the senses, is the object on which we meditate. This is an object that they select that serves as an anchor point to come back to when the mind has wandered toward a distraction. They mention several anchors: mantra, subtle sensation in the body, sound and the breath.

[The breath] becomes an anchor, and then the mind that wants to move all over and keep us distracted from being here where we are now, comes back to the breath. Then it will eventually learn to stay, that's the idea. Just like the mantra [meaningful words that are repeated during meditation to provide a verbal stabilizer for concentration] works the same way...[Sound can be used as an anchor as well] So you can hear sounds, and in the meditation, your mind and your thoughts will go to those sounds. So you let it go, and

then the sound sensation can become almost like a sheet of focal point. You just keep your awareness resting there on all the sounds. Instead of feeling that the sounds are taking you away from that centre, that focal point or that inner connection that we have, it actually becomes what keeps you there. (Ganesh)

I'm from a tradition that works very much with a mantra. The breath and the mantra almost become a sort of internal white noise which just subsides and subsides and subsides as you continue to move beyond that. (Lakshmi)

Using postural alignment to engage focus was another important tool the yogis said they used in the practice. The postures (asanas) created sensations of stretch, heat, muscle contraction and pressure change in the body that could be used as focal points of awareness. This draws the attention into the body and away from outside distractions.

I have a little routine that I follow and usually the routine cues the state [of concentration]. So, I start lying on my back rocking side to side in fetal position in very slow deliberate, subtle movement. Very often that will just draw my attention deeply into a concentrated state right away. (Gautam)

The yogis talked about how the direction of movement and alignment in the posture trained concentration. Just as with breath control, it required awareness and focus to maintain physical precision.

Let's say I'm placing my hands to do the handstand. I know that I'm likely to be thinking one step ahead to kicking up into the handstand, but instead, I bring, with an act of will, the mind to not jump ahead, to be in that exact instant of placing the hands. I'll place the hands, and I'll do it with great care so that the hands are placed exactly below the shoulders, that the fingers are spread, that the middle finger is facing exactly forward,

that the four corners of the palms are grounded. Only then I'll allow myself to move on from there. That's where the esthetic comes into it. So it's the placement and the care taken, so that your yoga practice is like a Japanese tea ceremony where everything is done with attention to the moment and being in the moment, and not thinking about the past or the future. The person is bringing that sense of poetry or attention. (Saraswati)

Steady, constant practice - the necessity for continuous practice. The second element that the yogis felt was important to the development in the practice was maintaining regularity. They felt that concentration and awareness could only be developed when the practice was consistent. Their minds were trained through consistent practice which then allowed them to experience an altered perception. They could only achieve this altered state with repeated training. Furthermore, they felt that they had to experience this awareness regularly in order for it to leave an impression on them. All of them believed that this meditative awareness, and the insights it affords, is inaccessible without regular practice.

That feeling [calmness, peacefulness and bliss] stays, even after you're finished your practice. It stays for a long time, that is why we do it everyday, even twice a day... Not just once a week, or twice a week. Practice every day. It purifies. Like, we are living in this world and we get stressed out and things like that,... so if you purify your body and mind everyday, you will have better concentration, a better way of living, a better way of having good decisions. They [yogis] can notice that one [missing practice], like they are missing something or they are losing something. My experience has been that it is great to practice everyday, even if you are just doing half an hour. But do something... connect to yourself, physically and mentally and spiritually, and then you get to know yourself and you do better... I do my practice everyday and I have meditation everyday, so every

day I feel connected to myself, and connected to the Supreme Consciousness. I do my practice in the morning, and after that, I am grounded the whole day, and at peace, and full of joy, and no problem ... Yoga is good, if you practice (laughing), then you get results, ... We eat everyday, so we should have practice everyday, and this maintains your health, and it maintains your mental level and it keeps you on the soul level, the spiritual level. (Ananda)

Many of the yogis talked about how, on those days when the mind is more distracted, the practice is still very important.

There are days it [meditative awareness] won't happen.....no matter how hard you try, but you've got to be having those days of trying and those days of practicing so that whenever the magic comes, it clicks and ... [you have] that greater experience. My sense is that it gets deeper and deeper. The TM people use an analogy of dying a cloth. They said you dye it, you bring it out of the dye, it would come into the sun and it would be a yellow colour. Then it would fade very quickly the first time... To really make the colour solid and strong and fast, you have to do repeated dyeing, you have to go in and you have to bring it out, in and out in and out in and out, over, and over and over and over again, and then the colour stays... the spiral is an upward spiral. It's not an automatic straight line, at least I've never found a straight line to Nirvana through some elevator button you can push ... You've got to keep going back into it [the practice], and redoing it and then until more and more of that [altered consciousness] just becomes your state. You can then hopefully just stay in that state. It's a nice objective. (Ganesh)

It was a process, and what I had understood was that you just don't stop, you just keep at it. It may look as if you're having a hard time, but it is part of what they call purification

or transformation. So I just kept at it. So there were harder moments, and there were easier moments, but it got easier and easier. At this point, for me, meditation is like drinking water. It quenches my thirst. It always feels good. The meditations will differ, but there is a fundamental sense of satisfaction...and if you don't meditate when you need to meditate, you lose contact with that, and you're back to square one. (Sat-shakti)

Many yogis acknowledged that, although theoretical study was important, understanding could only truly be developed from doing the practice, and witnessing how this can alter one's awareness. They felt that this awareness, that could only be accessed through the practice, is in total contrast to the way they normally experience themselves. Without experiencing this changed perception, it would not be possible for them to understand what is to be learned there.

If I didn't create it [this altered awareness] around me, I could be lost for years, because once you disconnect from that space, since it's experiential, there's no way you can remember about it, because the memory of it isn't there, and the memory of it isn't going to get me back to it. So the only way to get back is to get back into the present, which thinking about it or missing it or longing for it isn't going to do it. The only things that are going to get me there are the things that got me there in the first place. (Chandiran)

It's experiential, yoga is not just reading books, and 'oh, I think I'm enlightened'. It doesn't work like that. You have to have the experiential component and then you know that, and then you connect. When you are connected, that's your experience, that's your knowledge. One knowledge comes from reading books, that's the mental knowledge. One knowledge comes when you experience it. That's yoga, when you come to the experience. It's not just from the brain knowledge, or mind knowledge. (Ananda)

The yogis also maintained that consistent practice helped to stabilize their stress levels and strengthened their ability to cope with life's demands and pressures.

It [the practice] also allowed me to handle more and more stress. I went into law and there's a lot of stressors associated with that and I never missed my meditations. In fact when I was in first year law school, I'd go away for these long, long weekends, and come back feeling just like a noodle, because I was just so de-stressed from doing these rounds and rounds and rounds of pranayama and meditation and yoga. It was wonderful, but I stayed totally fixed on what I had to do to get through law school. That was single-minded focus on that, so what it allowed for was an increase in my confidence and an ability to take on many, many things. (Ganesh)

One of the yogis would use little reminders like slowing down her breath, or prayer, in order to reduce her stress level during times when she felt anxious.

I have a really stressful western job, and when I'm in that job, I'm completely out of balance, very knowingly, very, very aware of it, which is why I've structured my life so that I have these moments. The swimming every morning allows me to connect. The seated meditation practice everyday helps me to connect. I pray before every meal, I'll sit down, breathe, and then recite a prayer before my meal. Those exercises help me connect. I'll be in a very stressful situation and I'll start doing some anuloma viloma [breathing technique] to reconnect, so it is part of my everyday routine, but it's also a way for me to come back to this state when I'm completely thrown out of balance. (Lakshmi)

The importance of continuity – the loss of perspective with deficient practice. The third section under the second theme deals with the consequences that result from interruptions in the

practice. Several yogis spoke of their experiences when they missed their practice, and how this affected their state of mind.

After 19 or 20 years [of doing yoga], I tried to stop it for 3 or 4 months. I thought 'surely now, this is just crazy, I can stop this'. I went for about 2 or 3 months, and literally, I could feel myself getting more and more agitated as the time went longer away from me not doing the practice. I mean it was quite stunning. I even tried to do other things, like I would say, 'I'm going to feel happy now, I'm going to feel happy now', and repeat that, and it wouldn't work. There was something about the practice, there was something about the mantra. Everything about it was essential at the time. (Ganesh)

When I am practicing regularly there's a momentum, the cueing that I talked about happens more quickly, the lightness in my body, like I am practicing now, and I wake up feeling light and really agile and alive. I'm 57, and when I'm practicing regularly I just don't feel that age, I feel really young. As soon as I stop practicing, I start feeling creaky, not hugely but the less I practice, the creakier and older I feel and the harder it is to get into those concentrated states. So there's definitely a momentum that's cumulative, just like stress, the antidote-like effects of the practice is somehow cumulative. (Gautam)

It is like harmony in the body, breath and mind, and harmony with the supreme consciousness. So if I don't do that practice, I miss that. Like, if I'm traveling and doing things, after that I need my practice. Even if I don't do it like for 2 or 3 days, my body feels very different, and it responds differently. (Ananda)

If I go a day where I'm not connected at all, I feel really weird the next day, like something's missing but I can't figure out what's missing, and then when I get connected that way [in the practice], I remember, 'Oh yeah! This didn't happen at all

yesterday'...My experience is, if you're not doing some kind of practice to reinforce it [meditative awareness], it doesn't really last very long. You have to do something everyday where you feel you're connecting to that deeper experience so that your mind remembers it the next day, even if it's just breathing or prayer for 5 minutes at night, or making some kind of connection so that when I wake up in the morning, part of me remembers. Otherwise you could forget for decades.... [It's] like pearls on a string, even though the pearls are really far apart, you can see the one that's way back there from yesterday... So if it's not in your field at all, then there's a good chance it won't come in today, and there's a good chance it won't come in this week, or this year or next year.

(Chandiran)

Parinam (transformation) – time required for psychological change. The fourth subsection describes the developmental interval of the practice. Many of the yogis placed particular emphasis on the time duration required to experience the benefits of the practice. They felt that inner stability, the accessibility of the meditative states in the practice, the ability to focus, and parinam or transformation, all took time to develop.

My approach is saying: if the mind is scattered, it's scattered, so then let's focus it. Then you make an effort in terms of concentration. Then with time, with the years of practice, what happens is transformation comes. It is parinam - changes occur. That is my direct experience - I am happier every, every year ... You get happier, you get lighter, you get more content, and you mind things less. So that's what happens when you meditate. But after 30 years of doing that, you've gone to a very, very deep level that permeates the entire day... There's a time when you come to say, 'oh I need to meditate'. The day you will say that, will be a glorious day... When you start saying I need to meditate, it means

you have reached a higher level in your mind, a more stable place, a better place in your mind, with less buzz, less activity... You know your standard has changed. (Sat-shakti)

These changes don't happen over night. [My colleague] uses the image of a stained T-shirt going through the wash over and over again. The stains are always there, but they're a little bit less every time you go through the wash... It's a lot of washing and it takes a long time. (Gautam)

Some yogis talked about how it can be difficult to be patient with the practice, and to understand that the progression takes time.

If you don't have an ongoing, regular, slow integrative path, then you don't get the progression. [In our society] we want it [everything] instantly. ... If we don't get our whole blissful experience on an ongoing, integrated, permanent basis within 2 years, we're no good. But it doesn't work like that. I think it just works slowly, slowly, slowly. Bit by bit, it seeps in. Whether we like it or not, it's going to seep in and do something with your life. (Ganesh)

In the scriptures, they always say you have to go really slowly, and surely, and make sure you stay grounded. If you can't do your [regular] job that day, you're doing too much meditation. You can't go live in a cave until you've mastered doing it [developing your practice] in the world first. You always have to make sure that your feet are on the ground, and you can feel what's in your heart, those are the key things. (Chandiran)

The yogis explained that part of this process of change requires discipline, and it is not always an easy progression.

It's interesting to see how it takes time. You don't change over night, and it's very, very personal. But I'm aware that it's cumulative. When I started to meditate and I started to

work on myself spiritually, emotionally, intellectually, there were times where it felt much harder. I felt blocked. But I knew, and I was always told, never give up, just keep at it. I remember very tangible times of having that change, that parinam, that click occurs, and then I've felt, 'oh I turned a corner, I'm somewhere else, and Eureka! you know? Great! I can't believe! I feel much freer and stronger in an area where I was much more vulnerable. (Sat-shakti)

Anusasen (subtle understanding) - discipline through the love of the practice. The fifth subsection regarding development is involved with discipline and motivation. The yogis spoke about a momentum and passion for the practice that was fueled by continued involvement. They generated a commitment to the practice through total absorption and connection to what they were doing in their practice. One yogi used the word anusasen, which he defined as developing dedication in yoga by coming to know oneself better through a delicate sensing in the practice.

The word discipline, doesn't explain yogic discipline, because the language is changed. In yogic practice the word is Anusasen. Anu- means subtle, and sasen- means understanding or controlling, or just aware of that. That's discipline in yogic definition, it's not like military discipline, it is a little bit different. Yoga discipline is very subtly coming to know yourself, and to work with that... Discipline is very important in yoga practice, that's how you keep doing it everyday... Anusasen is working with the five senses. You will feel the subtle, and you will start to know yourself, and you will want to explore yourself then anusasen comes ... Anusasen builds the heat. To inspire you to keep on, that is anusasen ... When you are forced, then you are not doing yoga, you are forcing yourself, physically or mentally. It has to be friendly. (Ananda)

When I'm practicing like I am now, everyday, it takes no work to show up for it. I want to show up for it. It's what I'm doing. I work it into my schedule. When that's not happening, it seems like climbing Mount Everest to get there, it's like, 'Oh, no. I can't possibly do that'... [When I'm doing a regular practice] it's not effortful, it's got momentum, it's got its own energy. Right now, that's how practice is for me. It's really great. (Gautam)

For me, to be more connected, I must continue my meditation practice. Now the good news is that it's easy now. It's what I love to do most. (Sat-shakti)

Atmosphere – environmental factors. The last subsection within the Practice discusses the specific elements that the yogis presented that either facilitated or impeded their development in their practice. These factors included the physical environment, as well as physiological and psychological influences.

My main practice, since 1970 [over 30 years] has been to be present as much as I can, and let go of my ego impulses as much as I can. So what practices help facilitate that? Going into a store and grabbing a bunch of cookies and eating them does not, so I try to avoid that impulse. Deciding to stop and breathe, and look at trees or do some yoga postures strengthens that, so all the practices I do strengthen that underlying practice that I'm trying to do. So yoga postures, meditation, breathing, slowing down, healthy un-stimulating diet, exercise, fresh air, so all those things I've found to be helpful to be more present and open and free. Then there are a bunch of things I've found make it impossible, almost. You know, like stimulants, and not getting up during the day, being on the computer too much, or watching too much TV. So I try to minimize those as much as I can and maximize the others. (Chandiran)

In terms of the physical environment, holy places and nature were both mentioned as being beneficial influences on the practice.

Some places you go, you automatically start to get calm. You go into some good church, or some temple, or you go to some yoga place, then it happens. Or you go to India and there is so much chanting, and so many saints around you. That kind of environment makes you go deeper, while the other world is not pulling you out... [It] is very important to have a nice quiet place to have your practice, a sattvic place [an environment that is conducive to experiencing lucidity]. (Ananda)

I think one of the main problems in our culture is that people get so disconnected from nature. Nature is so intrinsically spirit and spiritual. So if you're in a place where there's a lot of blue and a lot of green, and flowing water and fresh air, then it's almost impossible not to at least feel better. It's almost impossible not to want to go deeper [become more spiritually connected] at some point during the day, because you're surrounded by all this beauty. Because so many people live in places where that hardly exists, it's definitely much more challenging for them.... I teach in New York City one weekend a month, and I can see how much more challenging it is for people. They have such a great weekend because they're all together, and then they have to go back out to the cement and the metal, and it's hard to get any inspiration at all. Then I come up here [to the mountains] and I get out of my car and I just stand in front of my place, and there are the stars and the sky. So I think humanity's choice to let things evolve so that we're more and more disconnected from nature is a huge part of it. It just takes that much more work to even open up to the possibility that there's a deeper place to live in, much less, even experience it, because everything feels so hemmed in. So if a person can figure out a

way, even through plants, you know, little bubbling things you can buy now, that have waterfalls and put them in your house, anything you can do in your environment to bring nature in just automatically makes it easier to go into the experience [of meditative awareness]. (Chandiran)

Another yogi also talked about the positive influence of stability in the environment. There's this thing called cueing that we know about which is when you repeat a practice very often at the same time of day or the same place, there's subtle cues that cue the state psychologically very quickly, and that's what happens to me. I usually do my practice in the same place, one of two places and simply getting there and starting can often cue the entire state right away. (Gautam)

The yogis discussed the potential that was created while they were on retreat. Yoga and meditation retreats are often designed to isolate the yogis from their social ties and responsibilities and create a safe environment where a deeper experience can be explored.

I was in Brazil last month at a Shaman retreat, and I'd go into the forest and I probably was in that space [meditative awareness] hours everyday, because there really wasn't anything to pull me out. I didn't know what time it was... so it was just much freer.

Which is, I guess, why they [Shamans] just go into the forest, there's nothing else to do, but be present. (Chandiran)

One of the yogis discussed the simplicity of life during one of his vinyasa trainings. "There were no rational mental activities involved to take you away from the state of concentrating on yoga. You didn't have to get in a car, and drive through downtown traffic or anything like this, it was very easy" (Vidya).

Some of the yogis spoke of the influence of family. Many of the yogis felt that their families had a strong impact on them and by extension influenced their practice either positively or negatively.

One of the greatest challenges is found with our families, like a brother, a sister, a mother can really get to people because we're so identified [with them]. In my early years of meditation, I would be much more affected by what would happen with my mom. I wanted to please her, but she couldn't be pleased because she didn't understand meditation. I always wanted her to be proud of me. I think we're all like that. (Sat-shakti)

When I'm hanging out with my [extended] family, I get very dissociated, and I really lose my concentration. I forget things. I think in general, there are two times [when this happens], when I'm out of my daily routine and my surroundings, my subtle mental concentration skills can very easily get disturbed, and when I'm around my family, it's so stressful that I can just drop out into this oblivion. ... I wouldn't dare work on anything important in those weeks or days when that's happening because I don't trust that I'm connected all the way down. (Gautam)

Something that [one of my yoga teachers] said in the training that I found to be very true and meaningful is that you can tell how solid your practice is by how well you're getting along with the people in your life, your family. Your practice has to be well balanced, it has to be comfortable within your life, otherwise there's going to be a lot of stress around it. For instance, a typical situation would be if you're trying to take time to do your practice and do meditation, and it's interfering with the rhythms of the household, and your partner is complaining that you're not available for other things and you're not sharing some time together at breakfast, that's not good. Some people would respond to

that and say 'to heck with it, I'm doing the practice, and you just have to put up with it'. Then you're both in stress. It would be better for you, as the yoga practitioner, to adapt your practice so that it's not such a disruption. In other words, just make the extra effort to get up before everybody else, so that you have the quiet house to yourself and then you're finished and you're having breakfast with people. Then everybody would benefit, you would have your practice done, you would be full of energy, full of love. Similarly in the evening, spend the time with people to find out about how their day was and to try and give them some emotional support and then do your practice. So, you should be in a state where people around you want you to do your practice because you're a much nicer person to live with after, when you are practicing. They'll be encouraging you 'oh yeah, go away on that retreat, that would be very good for you' (laughing). (Vidya)

Psychological and physical distractors within the body were often cited as detriments to the practice of developing a focused awareness. The yogis spoke about methods they used to diminish the influence of these distractions. Major strategies were conscientious lifestyle, avoidance of chemical stimulation and the maintenance of general health and energy level.

[It is beneficial to maintain] a state of health where there are no symptoms coming to the forefront to distract me. Also if the stomach is full and the blood flow is going to the digestive system, then it's difficult to be in that state [meditative state] because everything is drawn to the belly. (Saraswati)

Empty stomach [contributes to it]. I always practice either late morning or late afternoon when I have an empty stomach. No caffeine or stimulants of any kind. [It is also important to feel] pretty well going into it, in good shape, not sick, not really tired, feeling energetic. (Gautam)

Yesterday, I was teaching four classes and four classes is a little bit too much. I was tired. So today I did not have a strong practice. I had my gentle practice, calm and chanting and all of those things, but I didn't have that strong of a practice. So when you are not tired, and you have a good practice, then you have that type of stage [Samadhi]. When you're tired in your practice or in your daily life, then it doesn't happen. It has to be relaxed, totally, totally comfortable. (Ananda)

One of the recommendations was the avoidance of activities that increase mental associations and preoccupations.

Any stimulant, like coffee or sugar puts people right in their minds [becoming engrossed with mental activity, and less connected to our body and the present moment]. That's why they like using them. They don't have to feel their feelings because they're just thinking. Then the excuse is, 'well my mind's sharper'. Because it is, but then I'm in a really constricted experience because I'm just in my mental experience. All the other things are mental experiences, computer, TV and everything. So the more I'm in my mind, the stronger the ego gets. So the more I'm in my body or my feelings, in a more balanced way with my mind, the more present I can be. (Chandiran)

Alcohol dulls the brain, drugs dull the brain. But you don't need them because you're high doesn't come from that. (Sat-shakti)

Other important obstacles to the practice were psychological distractions, such as inner conflict or guilt. The yogis recommended ethical living in order to have a clear conscience when they come to their practice.

Every now and then I have one of those [distractions] that will happen while I'm in meditation. You know 'oh my God, I forgot to do this' or 'I wish I hadn't said that to that

person', which is precisely why all the traditions recommend practices of Right Behaviour. Because when you screw up, lie, cheat, steal, whatever, it disturbs your mind and that distracts you. So, I try to get to the mat as non-disturbed as possible in my mind and I do all those practices [of Right Behaviour] so that I don't have disturbed mind.
(Gautam)

I see so many people and sometimes, when they tell me their job, I almost stop breathing because it's a job that isn't very good for society and at some point they say they don't feel good about what they're doing in their job. It's a good income, but you can see it's the root of a physical problem, spiritual problem, whatever it is they're coming to see me for. As long as they have that job, it's really hard for them to get into the open space because their mind's constantly pulling on them like 'why are you doing this, why are you doing this?' So finding work that reinforces connecting to spirit is really important too. (Chandiran)

Discussion

I have attempted, in the previous results section, to provide a forum for the eight advanced yogis to describe, in their own voices, what happened to them in their practice. In examining the detail of the introspective experiences of these advanced yogis, I hope that I have been able to clearly illustrate their highly developed insights and knowledge, particularly with regard to the ways that they have been able to improve their ability to concentrate. In this chapter I will interpret the findings from the perspective of the two major themes that emerged from the data – The Nature of Yogic Awareness, and The Practice. To begin with, I will discuss the nature of concentration in terms of the yogi's experiences. Secondly, I will discuss what they have learned about the long-term training and development in concentration through yogic methods. I will also explore these findings in light of what they might mean to the field of sport psychology. Finally, I will situate this interpretation back to the existing literature on concentration as well as explore the implications of the findings in terms of future directions in research.

In looking at the Nature of Yogic Awareness, there were three main aspects that emerged related to training the mind and the ability to concentrate. The yogis offered many insights regarding the fundamental nature of focus (Effortless effort). They also explained what they experienced in achieving quiet mind, and described how this experience affected them (Witness consciousness). Finally, they placed a lot of emphasis on the knowledge they derived from the observational element of the practice (Panoramic wisdom).

Looking more closely at the yogis' comments related to the nature of focus, there is much that can be learned regarding the control of awareness or focus. Collectively, the yogis felt that focus within the practice was something that could not be forced. They all expressed that, in order to attain a continuous focused connection, they had to be alert, but at the same time, they

had to be relaxed and relatively indifferent to achieving the desired state. This assertion is certainly counterintuitive to the idea that quality focus requires exertion and mental control. The yogis did have to apply themselves, but they could not do it in a rigid, forceful manner.

According to these yogis, they achieved their best, focused connections, when they were able to remain open to the clarity of experience, without being affected by whether they reached a meditative state or not. I think the key lesson here is that in order to achieve a really clear and present focus, you have to maintain a certain willingness, and open-ness created by letting go of the resolve to succeed. Often when we need to focus, or we feel we have to focus, it slips away from us. The key message from these yogis is that in order to simply allow ourselves to come fully into the process of engagement, we need to let go of that urgency. The element of becoming preoccupied with making it happen is the one element that will keep us away from accessing full engagement. This aspect is about cultivating a psychological state that is less driven, and less desperate when we come into the performance arena in sport – it is important that we create the space for this openness to happen.

In relating this further to the context of sport, increased facility with focus and mental control has been demonstrated to enhance performance execution (Gould, et al, 1999; Orlick, 2000; Orlick, 2002; Ravizza, 1982; Werthner, 2002). In developing their ability to sustain concentration, athletes might find training in yoga would facilitate focus within many kinds of performance situations. The yogis in this study were learning to apply their focus to universal settings and applications, so whether we are looking at competition focus, or skill acquisition, by using yoga to enhance concentration, focus should be strengthened, regardless of the environment or situation.

The yogi's experiences of an effortless stilling of the mind rather than a forced focus also support Daniel Wegner's research and his theory of ironic processes (Wegner, 1997). He predicted that the stability of the mind could lie in the releasing of the operating and monitoring processes. This prediction is substantiated by the yogis' statements in that they achieved a focused connection through the effortless direction of attention rather than through intentional force. According to Wegner (1997) a coercive engagement would exacerbate ironic effects.

The second major area related to the nature of yogic awareness was the development of quiet mind to achieve what the yogis called 'witness consciousness'. Essentially, the benefit in achieving this consciousness is that it encourages healthier psychological behaviours including community mindedness, self-acceptance and respect, and freedom of thought and behaviour. Although fundamentally the yogis felt the usefulness of this perspective was to develop wellbeing in the pursuit of enlightenment, these elements were also helpful in strengthening cognitive function and ability to focus.

Largely, the yogis spoke about becoming liberated from dysfunctional behaviours and habits through the disassociation from the ego. The behaviours they spoke of included ineffective habits resulting from the belief that we must act in accordance with our perceived concept of self. The disassociation from one's ego, and a sense of how they 'should' act, gave them more freedom of thought and action. This sense of 'being the witness' facilitated the releasing of egotistical tendencies and beliefs. The yogis took things less personally and were able to perceive themselves as having a less central role in terms of events in their lives.

In a practical sense, athletes would benefit from greater psychological health: less preoccupation with antisocial or self-serving behaviour, and freedom from psychological distractions related to the needs of the ego. Both of these dispositions could contribute to greater

resilience, maturity and equanimity, as well as improved ability to concentrate on the task at hand.

Perhaps one of the more interesting findings in this study was the conclusions the yogis drew from their experiences regarding the nature of consciousness. Through the application of continual focus, they were able to access and experience an awareness that is usually hidden from us. As described in the traditional literature on yoga, many of them experienced themselves as separate from their mental activity and self concepts. This may have profound implications with regard to the scientific study of consciousness.

Up to this point scientific inquiry has not been able to answer the question of consciousness:

...even when we have explained the performance of all the cognitive and behavioural functions in the vicinity of experience – perceptual discrimination, categorization, internal access, verbal report – there may still remain a further unanswered question: *Why is the performance of these functions accompanied by experience?* A simple explanation of the functions leaves this question open... This further question is the key question in the problem of consciousness. Why doesn't all this information processing go on "in the dark," free of any inner feel? (Chalmers, 1996, p.9)

Essentially we are left with a chicken and egg quandary. These processes constitute the experience, not the awareness of having the experience, so we are always left with the question of how, or where can we find the observer of this experience.

Perhaps theoretically, we are discovering what these yogis have already learned - consciousness may not be the product of a neural or cognitive process, perhaps it may not be

something we can find in the brain. It seems that scientists have been testing their own proofs of the neti-neti tradition:

It is a fundamental fact of the phenomenology of our experience that consciousness is never given to us as an object. Therefore, the inescapable conclusion is that consciousness cannot, in principle, be scientifically studied, in the prevailing understanding and practice of 'scientific study'. (Puliglanda, 2004, p. 150)

These findings raise many interesting questions about consciousness. Surely these findings will lead to some interesting discoveries in the future.

In examining the third sub-element that emerged under the theme of the Nature of Yogic Awareness, entitled Panoramic wisdom, the yogis explained that one of the results of their extensive practice and cultivation of pure awareness was an ability to arrive at a clear vision of themselves and their lives. The yogis, in developing the ability to truly observe their own thoughts and experiences, became familiar with their patterns of being, and this awareness allowed them to profoundly change their lives.

In reflecting on the findings regarding the yogis' rational development through observation, there are many aspects that could expand our current understanding of concentration within athletic performance. In sport, athletes are always attempting to be focused on a task and are often attempting to eliminate thought patterns that are not instrumental in accomplishing that task. For the yogis, the insights discovered served to improve their ability to concentrate because the strength of their psychological distractions, such as their fear of failure, their lack of self-acceptance, or their clinging to ambition, was diminished. This method of practice might diminish the psychological distractions that affect athletes as well.

One aspect of this learning that should be emphasized is the development of non-attachment. The specific application of non-attachment to goals or outcomes is useful for athletes to apply to their training and competing. 'Renounce the fruits of your actions' - the rewards lie in being engaged with the process, with the training, with the learning, and with the sensations of engagement. If the fear and anxiety related to the outcome of possible 'failure' was not a central concern anymore, the detrimental effect on performance concentration would be diminished, which we already know from the sport psychology literature (Gould et al., 1999; Orlick, 2000; Ravizza, 2002; Werthner, 2002).

The yogis' thoughts on emotions, both within their personal lives and their yogic practice, also have potential application to the field of sport. Through the practice of stepping back and observing their emotions, these yogis became better attuned with their feelings, providing them with a sense of acceptance and honesty. This ability also allowed them to be able to experience emotions and understand that they simply had to let them go rather than work to suppress them. The yogis also felt that, as they progressed in their practice, they became less affected by stress, and more emotionally stable. The yogis were able to move into stressful situations with less emotional reactivity, and see more clearly how they should act in these situations. Their ability to stay balanced improved their focus.

This understanding and ability to observe and let go are, of course, useful in sport where feelings of fear, anger, stress, or regret are common and can be detrimental to a performance focus. By working with the emotions, as the yogis did, instead of fighting them, athletes would be able to assess a situation more quickly and make adaptations that would be beneficial rather than detrimental.

There are similarities here with the work of Albert Ellis (Ellis & Dryden, 1997). Within the REBT model, clients are encouraged to recognize that much of their discontent is of their own creation and that it is possible to eliminate it themselves. Through the use of logic and realism, these detrimental beliefs are recognized and challenged in order to come to more effective perspectives and behaviours (Ellis & Dryden, 1997).

In reflecting on the second major theme of this study, The Practice, it is clear that there were many aspects that influenced the yogis' ability to reach and maintain a profound sense of awareness, and there were many adaptations these yogis made in their training that impacted their ability to focus. Perhaps one of the most significant elements was the commitment to a training schedule. The yogis felt that daily practice was important and they found that they quickly lost their ability to focus effectively when they were inconsistent in their training. They also learned that the process of learning and change was slow. Although they felt that change was incremental, larger adaptations were very gradual. This follows from traditional knowledge in yoga as well as studies in meditation (Anand, Chhina, & Singh, 1961; Pascual-Leone, 2000; Valentine & Sweet, 1999).

A second interesting aspect the yogis spoke of was the practice of *pratyahara*. This concept, referred to as intentionally moving the attention away from stimulation, is not something that would typically be used in training focus for performance enhancement. In sport, the more common strategy is to focus on specific technical cues or game strategies. With *pratyahara*, the yogis were not learning how to focus, they were learning how not to be distracted. This is a subtle but crucial distinction. Instead of placing the emphasis on how to stay connected to the task, they were learning how to weaken off-task stimuli. Research has shown that this practice of open, non-focused awareness such as in mindfulness meditation does impact

reactivity to unexpected stimuli (Goleman, 2003; Valentine & Sweet, 1999) and essentially improves the distraction control of the practitioner.

Another convention established by the yogis, that could be a novel technique for use in sport psychology, was the practice of ethical behaviours in order to maintain a clear conscience and undisturbed mind. The yogis talked about maintaining ethical habits, such as being honest in their interactions with others, which then allowed them to be unencumbered by thoughts of regret or guilt. This decreased the amount of distracting thoughts that might affect their ability to concentrate and achieve quiet mind.

Finally, a further aspect shared by the yogis that could be helpful to sport, was the concept of Anusasen, the cultivation of devotion in the practice through the subtle understanding of the self. The yogis allowed the regular inquiry and learning within the practice to influence their discipline. They let their love of the practice grow through their continual absorption with the experience, and improved connection with themselves. If this idea could be applied to sport, it would be to encourage a focus on enjoyment and participation. This idea is, of course, similar to intrinsic motivation, which has been shown in research to benefit athletic performance (Vallerand & Rousseau, 2001), as well as wellbeing (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Deci & Flaste, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2001).

Applications

There are several key practices maintained by the yogis in this study that could be beneficial when applied to psychological training in sport. To begin with, in terms of sport psychology consulting, there are two elements that might prove helpful when applied to athlete interventions. First of all, it might be useful for consultants to employ a longer training period for psychological development. In light of the yogis' statement that psychological change is a

lengthy process, it should be acknowledged that if athletes want to develop a consistent ability to focus, they may need to invest several years, rather than several months in training the skill of concentration. Furthermore, training schedules should be continued throughout the off-season in order to maintain a progression. As well, following the recommendations of the yogis in this study, the consultant and athlete may want to consider maintaining some form of psychological training on a daily, rather than intermittent basis.

Secondly, sport psychologists, as well as coaches, might consider emphasizing a non-coercive training environment in order to promote the intrinsic motivation of the athlete. Taking an orientation that recognizes the inherent benefits of enjoyment of the activity, rather than rewards related only to winning, might decrease performance anxiety associated with competition, as well as promote a more autonomous dedication and commitment in the athlete.

In terms of the specific benefits of yoga practice with regard to performance enhancement, there are several unique qualities that might yield practical improvements in athletic performance. To begin with, the meditative awareness cultivated by regular yoga practice is meant to develop improved psychological wellbeing and cognitive efficiency. Secondly, the open, internal awareness cultivated through yoga might be an effective facilitator of concentration within situations where distraction control is necessary. Finally, the ethical practices observed within the yogic tradition might also improve the athlete's interactions within their social environment, decreasing the potential for psychological anxiety related to conflict and stress. In light of these considerations, coaches and athletes may want to consider using yoga or meditation as an element of their training routine.

Limitations of the Study

One of the major limitations of the present study was the difficulty in making explicit the yogis' experiences and immense knowledge accumulated over many years of practice. What each yogi actually experienced was not always easy for them to convey in words. In addition, there was difficulty interpreting the terminology used by the yogis since it is largely unfamiliar to the field of sport psychology. Many of the terms they used were Sanskrit, which are terms that are often difficult to translate without losing the subtlety of the meaning. Furthermore, many of the traditional words the yogis used to express themselves with regard to their yogic experience do not have the same meaning within the psychological literature. This made it difficult to convey their intended meaning within the context of the present study.

Future Directions

Since this research was exploratory in nature, there is much that remains to be learned about the nature and development of concentration in yoga. One potential research idea that might serve as a useful extension of this work would be an in-depth case study with an adept, such as a monk or a guru, who is accomplished in his spiritual training and is continuing on his path of devotion. Following an adept's experiences, as well as the fluctuations of his progress, could lend more of an insider's view of the development and progression of the experiences and knowledge acquired by such an individual.

Another line of future inquiry would be to verify whether there are generalized insights that are created by the practice. For example, it would be interesting to compare yogis or meditators with a non-practicing control group in order to compare their abilities to regulate their emotions. This method could also be used to see if emotional stability improves through the practice of yoga or meditation. At this point, there have been some preliminary studies that

indicate long-term practitioners do gain an increased regulatory control over emotions, as well as improved emotional sensitivity (Goleman, 2003).

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways that experienced yogis perceive concentration, and to examine their reflections on how they developed this ability. It was assumed that those who were advanced in their practice would have a great deal of insight to share on what exactly they are experiencing as they practiced and how they had developed this skill. I hope that both the yogis' description of what it is to achieve quiet mind, and the ways that they arrived at this experience, will help athletes and coaches to better understand the nature and developmental potential of concentration. Through the application of concentration to their internal awareness, these experienced yogis have offered many insightful observations about the operation of their minds, including the technicalities of focus. Through their extensive yogic practice, the yogis developed a profound awareness that, in turn, allowed them to appreciate the impact they have on the world around them. It is hoped that my discussion and interpretation of what the yogis have said regarding their experiences have been true to their meaning. It is also hoped that the two major themes and nine subsections have effectively illustrated what each of the yogis experienced throughout their years of practice.

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Appendix A

Consent Form

Being in the Moment: Yoga and the Development of Concentration

Name of researcher: Tanya Witteveen, B. Sc.
Institution: University of Ottawa
Faculty of Health Sciences
School of Human Kinetics.
Telephone number: 613-523-6504
E-mail address: twitt081@uottawa.ca

I, _____ agree to participate in the research conducted by Tanya Witteveen, of the School of Human Kinetics from the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Ottawa. The purpose of the research is to examine how concentration develops in the practice of yoga.

My participation will consist essentially of attending an interview of approximately one hour, and within the month, a second follow-up interview of approximately one hour which may be conducted by telephone if time does not allow for an in-person meeting. Both interviews will be conducted in English. The sessions will be scheduled at my convenience and those of the researcher. I will be asked to reflect on my yoga practice and to articulate my subjective experience of my ability to focus. I understand that the contents will be used only for the purposes of this research and that my confidentiality will be respected. I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. Anonymity will be assured by assigning a number to my file so that my name will not appear on or identify any transcript. Furthermore, the audiotapes and transcripts of the interviews will be stored in the resonance laboratory in a locked cabinet, and only the researcher will have access to the codes and data. Audiotapes and transcripts, and soft data will be conserved for 5 years after publication in the office of Dr. Werthner at the University of Ottawa, after which time they will be destroyed. I will be able to receive, by providing an electronic address below, a summary of the findings of this research, which will be available in January 2006.

I understand that this activity deals with personal information about my development in yoga and that the risks involved are very minimal. If I agree to be part of the study I will be asked to meet with the researcher for an interview of approximately one hour and then for a second interview of approximately one hour. I will have an opportunity to review my transcripts of the interviews if I so choose and to be allowed to remove,

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add and/or modify any information that I feel necessary. If I regret disclosing something about myself or my development, the information will be excluded from the data base and will not be reported in any form of communication.

I am aware that this study retains inclusion criteria whereby:

- Yogis have maintained a dedicated practice over a minimum of twenty years
- Yogis are currently maintaining a dedicated practice (practicing a minimum of 45 minutes most days, approximately 6 out of 7 days per week)
- Yogis must be fluent in the English language

The goal of the research is not to evaluate my abilities as a yogi but to draw a general profile of a yogis' experiences and abilities to focus. I also understand that a long-term goal of this research is to use the information presented by many individuals practicing yoga to develop and explore the role of concentration in the development of well-being and performance enhancement. I am also aware that the results of this study will be presented at conferences and or published in psychological journals but that my name will not be mentioned at any time. Within this data, I am aware that I may be quoted, and that the researcher will be using pseudonyms when relating these quotations that the contents will be altered or removed so as not to reveal my identity.

I understand that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time, before or during an interview, refuse to participate and refuse to answer questions without prejudice.

If I have any questions with regards to the ethical conduct of this research, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 159, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5, tel.: (613) 562-5841, email: ethics@uottawa.ca.

There are two copies of the consent form: one for the yogi, and one for the researcher.

If I withdraw from the study, I want that the data gathered from me until the time of my withdrawal be destroyed and not be used. _____

If I withdraw from the study, I want that the data gathered from me be nonetheless used for the study. _____

Researcher's signature _____ Date: _____

Yogi's signature _____ Date: _____



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Should you have any questions regarding this research project, please contact

Dr. Penny Werthner at:
Tel number: (613) 562-5800 ext. 4350
E-mail address: werthner@uottawa.ca
School of Human Kinetics
Faculty of Health Sciences
University of Ottawa

OR Tanya Witteveen at:
Tel number: (613)
562-5800 ext. 4950
E-mail address:
twitt081@uottawa.ca
School of Human Kinetics
Faculty of Health Sciences
University of Ottawa

I want to receive the transcript of my interviews. Yes _____
No _____

I wish to receive a summary of the findings of this research.
Yes _____ No _____

Please email a summary of the results to:

Appendix B
Interview Guide

Questions regarding the Development of Concentration

- 1) When you are totally connected, totally engaged within your yoga practice – how would you describe that experience? What do you feel like? What are you aware of?
- 2) How often are you totally connected like that?
- 3) What do you think contributes to you being fully connected or less than fully connected?
- 4) Can you tell me about one of your best focused connections? A time when you were absolutely connected – just the way you want to be (within yoga)?
- 5) How would you describe what you are doing when you are in that connected state?
- 6) Can you tell me about a specific time when you were less than connected or more distracted than you would like to be? (if encountering difficulties, Tell me about yesterday?)
- 7) How has your ability to connect fully changed over time? (When you first began yoga training to now – take me on your learning journey with respect to becoming focused and staying in the moment)

Probe for details:

- a) Recent and specific experiences
- b) Differentiations and evaluations of experience
- c) Obstacles and Facilitators
- d) Techniques used
- e) Changes

Questions regarding Subjective Changes related to Yoga and Concentration

What has changed for you because of your yoga practice?

Probe for:

- a) Personal psychological changes related to concentration
- b) Subjective outlook on life
- c) Other areas (relationships, work, beliefs)
- d) Gradual changes over the duration
- e) Contrasts between “on the mat”, and “off the mat”

Question to Extend and Conclude the Interview

Is there anything you would like to add regarding your understanding of concentration and yoga?

Appendix C
Second Interview Guide

- 1) Is there anything that you would like to talk about with regard to reflections on the last interview?
- 2) Can you discuss any new experiences you have had during your practice since the last interview?
- 3) Is there anything you would like to add regarding your experience of concentration?
- 4) Can you elaborate more on how your ability to concentrate has developed?
- 5) Is there anything you would like to add regarding the impact your ability to concentrate has had on your daily life?

Appendix D

Their Stories

There are a multitude of lessons that the yogis learned in their practices, and each yogi had a different story to tell. This section is a recounting of some of the events that took place in each of the yogis' lives that impacted their development in some meaningful way. In highlighting these events, it is hoped that the full richness of these experiences will be made clear to the reader. Each story is begun with a brief character sketch of the yogi followed by a caption of one of their stories.

The nature of 'Self'.

Although we are in a crowded and noisy coffee shop, Lakshmi makes me feel as though we are the only two people left in the world as she opens herself completely to share her experiences. She is animated and expressive and she speaks with lots of emotion. Her intensity draws me in so that I feel as though I were sharing her lived experience as she retells it.

She hasn't had it easy, and in recent years, she has been afflicted with serious illness. This event has brought new insight to her practice and she relates the wisdom she gained to me: her realization of the nature of her true 'Self'.

I've been extremely ill over the past few years, and ... for me, it's truly the blessing of almost dying, and the shock of truly having it in your faith that your form is finite, and losing that fear [of death]. My body was completely gone, I could barely walk anymore. I'm like this, but still I'm me, despite the fact that my body is no longer working. I'm crazy, because I'm so weak. So sick, my mind isn't functioning properly, yet I'm still me. I'm still here. I'm still a being. So it's like being confronted with the living experience of being a divine being.

The nature of attachment.

Chandiran is a medical doctor in his middle age. He has also acted as director of a highly respected yoga teacher training, and has written several publications on the discipline of yoga. He has a very warm, and welcoming nature, as well as a very intelligent way of expressing himself. His elven features and demeanour remind me of Santa Claus, and I feel very comfortable with him right away. He is a great story teller and loves to share.

Chandiran became a long-term resident of an ashram community after he had completed medical school. Ashrams are live-in communities developed in India that serve to encourage yogic practice and lifestyle.

This is his story of how he overcame the loss associated with the break down of his community and how he was able to surpass his spiritual accomplishments in letting go of his dependence on the ashram practice and lifestyle.

[While living at the ashram it became harder to function in the outside world] , it was hard for me to even order a pizza because I was too high ...you know, it didn't make sense that a nickel was worth more than a dime when I looked at it, so then I couldn't figure out what was worth what... That didn't feel bad at the time because I was just going to be with [the ashram] my whole life anyway, so it was just sort of fun.

[Unfortunately, later on the ashram fell apart because of allegations against the Guru], so then most people left. I stayed because my daughter was here. All of a sudden, all of my friends were gone so then I couldn't meditate at all, and I got totally depressed because I was alone in my own place and... even if I thought about doing a yoga posture, I'd start crying because I'd miss doing it with everybody. [I also felt that I was no longer able to achieve the meditative states I could before because] there was such a premium that [the ashram style of] yoga was the best practice, and that was our flag. [Despite this belief]

every night I meditated, and every night I would fall into this deep hole of depression. But then, after a few months, I would fall into it but I could breathe my way out of it before I went to sleep. Then about 6 months later, one night I meditated, and it didn't happen at all. It was just a deeper-than-ever meditation, like I had worked through something and that's when I remembered that, 'oh I had this experience before I moved to [the ashram] and sometimes even more intense. So I can have it anywhere!' It had been totally drummed into me that it could only happen at the ashram.

The nature of consciousness.

Saraswati has a very casual and friendly manner as she invites me into her home and offers tea. Her house is decorated with beautiful pictures of foreign lands and artifacts from exotic cultures. I am certain that she has more than one exciting story to tell about her past adventures. She has a poetic way of speaking, and her vivid creativity is articulated as she relates what she has learned.

She described her experience in the practice of being brought closer to the true nature of reality.

It's like having the scales taken from your eyes, and realizing what was already there. That was the feeling I had as a very, very young child, almost my preverbal memories were that something had to be torn back. Something was hidden behind a screen ... that's what first drew me to the path. Some people are drawn to yoga to cure disease. I was always drawn to yoga to see what was hidden and to understand better.

Her progression in yoga had a major impact on her life and well being.

That informs my life in a huge way - that our awakening is a purpose. The whole reason for this whole manifestation here, all of it, is awakening. So when you have that at the

core of your experience, very rarely are you troubled by feelings of meaninglessness and uselessness, and it is like your success in the world is not that important to you. I mean, in some sense, I'd like to be a successful yoga teacher, [only] because I would like to tell more people the good news.

The nature of devotion.

Sat-shakti is soft-spoken. She has bright inquisitive eyes, and a very receptive, patient disposition. We are in her sitting room and I can hear her birds chirping in the background as she tells me stories about India. You can see her emotions wash over her as she relates her past to me.

She is a scholar in yoga, and has spent many years in India studying. She talked about one of her experience while she practiced there.

I was meditating all night... about 12 or 14 hours of meditation everyday... and I lived in a little house up on the mountains, in the Himalayas. [In the early morning] everybody would walk down and begin their day, and I had finished my day. When I would walk up that hill, the bliss permeating every cell of my body was unparalleled. It was contentment beyond what you can conceive of. I would go home and I would sit. I had a bit of a terrace and I would have a view that was just unbelievable with river and mountains and paradise birds, and I'd have a cup of tea...

The nature of austerity.

Ananda has a very unassuming and pleasant manner. His home was simply decorated and smelled of incense. Although only in his late twenties, Ananda's knowing disposition make him seem much older, his thick beard adding to the obscurity of his age.

Ananda is a yoga teacher who had traveled to Canada from India several years back. Amongst his accomplishments are 21 years of involvement in yoga, a Master's and PhD in the philosophical study of yoga, as well as a proprietorship of a yoga studio, as well as an ashram.

He shares some incredible stories about his childhood training back in India.

[My serious involvement began when] I was eight years old. I was doing yoga before that, but I started to be serious about it when I moved into the spiritual school, called gurukul.

Guru-, means teacher, kul- means family, family of the teachers. That's the traditional system of yoga, where the students go in the forest and the gurus teach there. So I went there when I was eight years old. [At the time] my parents wouldn't send me, but I wanted to go. So I was crying for six months to go there (laughing) and then finally they sent me. So that is where I learned, and since then I've done my practice....We were more than 100 students. So we would study about Sanskrit, about kriya yoga, Vedas, mantra, yoga, fire puja, and ayurveda. ...We'd wake up at 4:00, then we would go for a walk and then we study, then we would have yoga practice, then we had baths, baths in the river (laughing). Then we had chanting and fire puja, which we called havan, to purify the new environment everyday and after that we had breakfast.... it was the whole time table from 4:00 AM until 9:00 PM.

The nature of habit.

Vidya has a quiet, vigilant disposition. He is a man of few words, but the knowledge he does offer is straightforward and well-considered. You get the sense that he is very certain of everything he shares and that he does not chance speculations or estimates; he is very confident of what he imparts. His logical character make the exchange even more enlightening.

He draws an interesting framework of his realization of the nature of habit through his practice. Closely related to the non-coercive perspective of anusasen, he draws out the parallels of how this has permeated the rest of his life, and how his health and well-being has improved.

When you're not doing yoga, you can still apply your awareness to things going on around you, and decisions you have to make. You'll make different decisions and hopefully they'll be made in a natural spirit where you're not doing something because you think you should. It just feels right, you're very comfortable with the choice... [This happens because] your internal sensitivity through yoga allows you to realize that after one glass of wine, maybe you've had enough, or if you over-indulge and you get up the next morning and you find that your yoga practice is really bad, that negative experience is more influential than the positive experience of the night before... So you don't want to stop doing those things just because of outside pressure, you find that the pleasure you get from them just naturally falls away.

The nature of the psychological potential of the practice.

Ganesh has a very quick-witted, inquisitive nature. He is well-spoken and has a highly developed understanding of the practice as well as its implications regarding reality and existence. He is eloquent and has a perfect anecdote for nearly every statement he makes. He is friendly, patient, intent and open.

He has been practicing yoga and meditation for more than two decades, and recently has begun teaching as well. He is also a lawyer and co-owner of two yoga studios. He shares a story about healing and the psychological potential of the practice; he describes his journey of coming from a state of dysfunction to a state of high performance and finally reaching a level of higher awareness.

I was in my early twenties, and I had what some would call a nervous breakdown, or what some would call a depressive episode, where I didn't know what I was doing and where I was going. So I ended up in a psychiatric wing of a hospital ... [At the time] I didn't want to take any of the psychiatric drugs that they were giving me. So I refused to do that, but then eventually got onto a TM meditation practice... When I started that practice, I could not get through the day because I was too anxious. So I had to calm down, I had to settle. I was seeing a university psychiatrist at the time, and she said that she was thinking of pulling me out of university in the first half of the term. I started the meditation at Christmas time, and after the second half of the term she said, 'ok, whatever you're doing, keep doing it'. Because she could see the difference, she could really notice it. So it allowed me to cope.... Later it [the practice] became more something that was a progression beyond coping...[and] what it allowed for, was an increase in confidence and an ability to take on many, many things. ... [Now] I don't want to just use it [yoga] to get by... it's no longer a crutch, that's just supporting the rest of my life. The rest of my life is now the crutch that's supporting the yoga.

The nature of the three marks of existence.

Gautam has a wonderful intensity, he really listens, and connects with me while we are speaking. He has a contagious enthusiasm for the practice which is clearly expressed in his every gesture. His voice is soft and deep, and soothing in a way that I feel I could listen to him speak for hours.

He is highly regarded in the field of yoga, and has written several important books on the philosophy and practice. He began his professional career as a psychotherapist and has now left the practice to give his full attention to the psychological study and development of yoga.

During the interview, he spoke about his experiential awareness of the three marks of existence, anicca (impermanence), anata (no-self) and dukkha (suffering), and describes the meaning and significance behind these concepts.

The insight into the pervasiveness of unsatisfactoriness, of dukkha, of suffering, is created by any degree of grasping. Any degree of aversion creates dukkha... With the insight into impermanence, you see how everything - thoughts, objects - arise and pass away, moment by moment, and how fleeting it all is. Anata is the insight into the impersonality of all phenomenon. It's not personal, it's not me, there is no 'I'. There is no 'I-self' under it's own power, running things. It's just experience arising and passing away. We all live in delusion, and the fundamental delusions are the belief in the permanence of objects, the belief in the permanence of the self, and the belief that somehow we can possess objects of longing and that they'll make us feel better, and that's not true.