

The Uberisation of Yoga

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In her essay the author introduces, explains and discusses her concept of “uberisation of Yoga”. The metaphor is designed to depict the current trend of consumerism spreading into the area of Yoga, particularly through online Yoga classes. The main objective of the article is to address limits of virtual Yoga teachings as compared with traditional ways of Yoga transmission.

In using online applications to practice Yoga, are we actively participating in the automatization of the human body or is this part of the democratization of Yoga and its accessibility to all? By asking this question I would like to introduce a reflection on the practice of Yoga online. No so much to polarize opinions about whether this might be good or bad, but to offer facts as well as subjects for reflection.

There is an economical and political aspect, and then I question the medium of the digital screen itself its effect on the nervous system and the philosophical questions that this generates. We all know the story of UBER. The American application, which connects taxi drivers to their potential clients (recently diversified into delivering food). What distinguishes UBER taxis is that there is no money exchange and the charge is visible online. There is usually a bottle of water and some sweets available in the car. What's relevant here is that the manner of the delivery of the service is dictated by the app, the driver is no longer the provider of the service, Uber is, but the mere executor of it, in other words, becoming automated. What we have to understand is that the value and profit are no longer in the service provided but in the interface between consumer and supplier, the application.

This de-humanization of people in both the "service and the cultural industries" is now happening on many levels of the socio-economical strata. In the next few years we are to see a massive automatization of all manner of work. So you might ask what has all this to do with Yoga?

The proliferation of online Yoga over the past few years has followed the logic of the market. Targeted advertising and competitive posturing. Apparently, we can "do yoga anywhere", we don't have to worry about cool outfits, expensive studio fees, big classes, annoying teachers, the state of our hair or the smell of our breath.

We are supported in being the center of our own universe, unquestioning the new forms of oppression distilled by the technological super-powers or GAFA, i.e., Google, Amazon, Facebook and Apple, the matrix on, which these apps depend, and that will make use of anything that it can find a market for.

It so happens that Yoga is in great demand in these times of uncertainty and despair. All manner of spiritual practices are traded on the internet, previously hermetic teachings are made available to all. Yogis and thinkers of all kinds are bringing value to these apps, mostly in good faith, but I suspect, utterly unaware of the economic and ideological consequences they are participating in propagating. It matters no



About the author

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longer what the content might be, anything goes really, even the most radical ideas are appropriated, what matters now is the frame work within which these ideas are delivered.

Yoga anytime, anywhere through the medium of screens has the potential to destroy temporality, the dance of intermittence. The alternating rhythms of life. Time to work, eat, relax, sleep and dream, time to practice. It can also blur seasonal rhythms. All of which are essential for us to be able to take conscious action.

The singularity of the human brain is that it can disorganize itself completely and reorganize itself throughout in relation to its environment and the "screens" it has invented, from cave paintings to digital tools. How does the current addiction to screens reorganizes the brain? What makes our brain

human is that it is capable of experiencing “revelation”. We all know that a true revelation is a call for action.

The general idea in the *Bhagavad Gita* is that awareness is the mechanism of transformation, and is manifested through selfless action (Ravinda 2017, 59). Sri Aurobindo develops this in the synthesis of Yoga where he introduces the notion of Chit-Shakti, “consciousness-energy”, explaining that consciousness is not only Chit, the power of awareness, but also a dynamic creative force of manifestation (Aurobindo 1939–1940, 82). But screens, by nature both reveal and occult. Of course, like all exo-somatic organs, they are both beneficial and toxic, depending on our consciousness.

We are now witnessing a reorganization of the human brain in relation to advanced technologies. The question is: Is this helping to support and evolve our consciousness or is it producing a regression and a blunting of the senses? What the French philosopher, Bernard Stiegler calls “*a general cretinisation*” (Stiegler 2004).

When we practice from a screen, we enter into relationship with the screen. In front of a screen we experience a re-orientation of our desire for self-revelation towards the consumption of a new good, which is now the Yoga teacher. The nature of a good is that it can be consumed. On Yoga online sites, we witness a standardization of presentation. Smiling, on top form, automatons, not changing human beings, negotiating a bad cold, the death of a loved one, or a breast surgery! The teacher becomes de-humanized.

The teacher does not see, feel or hear you. Equally, the practitioner emits nothing towards the teacher. There is no body to body resonance. You are on your own attempting to make sense of a refined and difficult technology, Yoga, which requires a strong connection with our endo-somatic capacities like attentiveness, focusing, breath awareness, the felt-sense out of which an intimacy with the self, a knowing evolves. This I would like to contrast to “information/knowledge”, which can be gathered exo-somatically.

To transform “impulse” as in “on demand” into “desire”, which requires an investment of time, resources and love, we need education and we need time. According to human development neurologists, this apprenticeship takes from 12 to 20 years. In replacing social relationships, cultural industries are eroding educational processes and the adaptation processes that these require. In Yogic education the transformation goes further still, desire is transmuted into aspiration, inspiration, a new breath, an expansion of the practitioner’s field of experience, a new way of being in the world. Patanjali re-

minds us that this is brought about by diligent practice in the spirit of non-attachment over a long period of time (Ravinda 2009, 19).

The current culture of immediacy and instantaneous results is slipping into the world of Yoga. People don’t want to learn; they expect to get what they want and have paid for as fast as possible. There appears to be a general reluctance for the effort of learning. Much is made of “effortlessness” of “following the flow” (one can but question which one?) forgetting that the effort of attentiveness is at the root of all practice. There seems to be palpable loss of the capacity to stay attentive, to keep the mind focused. More and more the mind jumps from one object to the next, from one practice to another, with little or no discernment as to the effects that Yoga’s powerful practices have on the central nervous system.

The web becomes an adipose matrix where we can find all manner of information, but which provides us with no lasting experience of “knowing”. The time for assimilation and integration is non-existent. The knowledge is dis-embodied. This might well be why the notion of “embodiment” is becoming a fast selling point in the “health” industry. The very language used on these applications is revelatory of the mind set behind them. We are told: “*A notable issue for new yogis is the selection of a teacher.*” (Schmidt 2014).

Whatever happened of the sense of the teacher crossing our path when we are ready to receive the teachings? This has more to do with a psycho-spiritual alignment than the click of a button. Then the site proceeds to guide us to a page where we are literally told how to select a teacher and what is important in this selection process. The danger here is the automatization of the decision-making process. We no longer rely on our felt-sense, our intuition, our connection with the *Vijnanamaya Kosha*, but on someone else’s criteria. So how will this affect our bodies and consciousness in the longer term?

Of course, I am not suggesting giving up the internet, I am myself using it all the time for my research. And I find it a wonderful information resource, but can the highly refined technology of Yoga be reduced to simple information?

This refined technology of the inner workings of the human being that is Yoga includes a set of subjective tools that can bring about singular experiences of clarity, integration, peace, wholeness. But Homo Sapiens is not only a biological being but also a technological one. From the dawn of time we have been creating objective tools that bring us convenience and comfort.

With the flooding of Yoga applications on the internet we are led to believe that Yoga is part of this objective set of tools that bring comfort and convenience to our lives. This obviously misses the point and insidiously plays into the consumerist ideology, which, as we all know, produces enormous amounts of toxicity on many levels.

One must observe carefully what our mind set is when we reach for the computer screen to get into our practice and what is the difference when we sit or lay down with the intention of internalizing our attention making ourselves receptive to the tides, waves, vibrations, undulations, beats and rhythms that our nervous system, our fluid body our mind register and translate as the inner life. The internal ecosystem of our embodied being. But we are told that we can do whatever we want whenever we want. And only be concerned about fitting in a cool workout in the midst of our busy lives.

Contemporary neuroscience has been researching the relationship between the human brain and current technology prompting us to take perspective and question the notions of “knowing” and “not knowing”. Is not-knowing bad in itself or is not wanting to know that we don’t know where the problem might lie?

As Yoga has now fully become a consumer’s product, peddled by teachers who have unknowingly also become products, our communities have to increase their vigilance. Yoga apps want to reassure their users that yoga demands no effort on their part. All we have to do is choose, with the click of a button or the swipe of a finger. We can ask what has multiple choice got to do with the freedom that Yoga promises? The underlying concept here is freedom *for* the self as opposed to freedom *from* the self, Yoga.

The practitioner is reduced to a mere consumer and the teacher to a mere executor of a service. The provider of course, is the one that picks up the cash, the application.

If Yoga is to be guided from within and trusting one’s own reference system, how does this work in front of a screen, which demands an externalization of our awareness? We can ask ourselves what is our action in the world, both individually and collectively and does that give us the measure of what Yoga is?

The narcissistic culture, in which we practice and teach is now given full rein to dictate what constitutes good Yoga and how it should be delivered according to a set of values rooted in a particular ideology.

To conclude I would like to suggest that we need to question this ideology for it is toxic and can render us sterile. Let’s not allow Yoga practitioners and teachers to become technological sheep.

We need to THINK. We might believe we think too much, while in truth, what passes for thinking is mere rehashing, repeating, memorizing, remembering, sorting our immediate needs, easing anxieties and negotiating fears. Thinking is a creative effort, it is not a calculation. It is the ability to change direction, to shift. To think intelligently is to liberate ourselves from automatic responses dictated by the ‘free market’ so that we may be able to create new models.

My question is: As a community are we up to the task of producing potent thoughts, thoughts that can generate powerful action and bring about the changes that are so desperately needed?

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