

The Virtual Mandala: Three Registers of Presence in Covid-era Mixed Reality Yoga Immersion

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Abstract:

The Covid-19 pandemic has created a paradoxical situation within the global practicing community of Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga. A physically rigorous and rigidly systemized form of postural yoga, Ashtanga has the formal characteristics of a practice that could survive the social fragmentation of quarantine and possibly thrive in a situation of forced "self practice." Instead, many teachers and practitioners have been experimenting with virtual practice spaces where a pedagogical relationship that was previously characterized by somatic immediacy, synchronized breath, and physical touch is now mediated through the audio-visual interface of Zoom. While this ad hoc format may amputate the tactile, ambient dimensions of group practice IRL, the digital format has also extended the geographic scope of these communities of practice, allowing new practitioners access to senior instructors around the world.

This paper documents an early experiment in Ashtanga "immersion" across hybrid physical and virtual spaces. As a decade-long practitioner of the form, I enrolled in a two-week intensive (Aug. 17-29, 2020) at the Shambhala Center in Boulder, CO, conducted by senior teacher Ty Landrum in situ with 20 socially-distanced practitioners and concurrently via Zoom with over 100 others around the world. Landrum conceived of this hybrid practicing community as a mandala, extending from the Shambhala Center to the physical and affective practice spaces of those joining remotely. I identify three registers of "presence" that the intensive was able to

name and enact: An immediate “first order” presence of those practicing with direct somatic awareness of one another; a “second order” social co-presence of those participating from a geographic distance; and an interoceptive dimension of presence enacted within the embodied experience of each practitioner in either the immediate or mediated forum.

Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga as Retromediating Anthropotechnics:

Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga (often just Ashtanga Yoga or interchangeably as the Mysore method) is the name generally used to describe the practice of postural (*hatha*) yoga taught by the late K. Pattabhi Jois of Mysore, India. Ashtanga is one of the major 20th century yoga traditions that globalized rapidly starting in the 1970s and has formally shaped what historian Mark Singleton (2010) calls “transnational anglophone yoga,” a syncretic blend of techniques, philosophies, and cultural formations that by now extends well beyond the English-speaking world. In this global context, many ad hoc and commercialized versions of yoga practice have shed a clear, discrete genealogical trajectory, figuring as what Theodora Wildcroft (2018) has dubbed “post-lineage yoga.” Ashtanga is distinct from this milieu in that its methods of practice, pedagogy, and structures of authority continue to be facilitated through *guru-shishya parampara*, the direct transmission from teacher to student of proper technique. The so-called “Mysore method” of Ashtanga yoga is a form of directed self-practice whereby each practitioner works through a set sequence of postural forms (*asana*) according to a calibrated and metered breath count. The teacher’s role is to determine proficiency in each form according to respiratory capacity and ease, and will stop the student in their progression through the increasingly challenging sequence of postures accordingly. The modularity of the sequence allows the student to practice away from

the Mysore room in their own time, space, and cultural/linguistic context, foregrounding self-practice as the primary venue for the method, and so distinguishing its somatic function from athletic competition or aesthetic demonstration (dance, etc.), as might be mistaken in a group setting or on social media. I contend that the Ashtanga method should be understood as a “retro-mediating” practice of somatic awareness that inverts the customary “outward” directionality of perceptual attention “inward” toward speculative structures and loci in the affective “subtle body.” This instrumentalizes the process of *pratyahara*, or “sense withdrawal” articulated by classical commentators like Patanjali, Swatmarama, and others (Bryant, 2009; Muktibodhananda, 1985). If the reader will permit another ungainly term offered to link our discussion of somatic practice across differing registers of mediation, I suggest that Ashtanga’s postural sequence can be usefully described as “algorithmic anthropotechnics,” a cross-disciplinary assemblage (Golumbia, 2009; and Sloterdijk, 2013, respectively) meaning a set of instructions executed for the purpose of the practitioner’s subjective becoming.

In a traditional “Mysore room,” each practitioner moves independently and asynchronously through the portion of the series designated by their teacher, receiving physical and verbal adjustment from the teacher at their discretion. In pre-Covid times, the ambience of a busy Mysore room in the early morning is one of silent intensity, with oceanic waves of humid breath washing through the sweaty mass of bodies. When the Covid-19 pandemic and global quarantine efforts swept the globe in Spring 2020, the Mysore method (along with most physically intimate social practices) entered a phase of formal reevaluation. This followed a decade of major transformations in the Ashtanga tradition. When the elder Jois passed in 2008, his grandson R. Sharath Jois took over the lineage as *paramaguru*, running the family practice

space (*shala*) in Mysore and authorizing an increasingly diverse cadre of students to teach the Ashtanga Vinyasa method in Mysore-style shalas around the world. To accommodate the rapidly growing community, the younger Jois' greatly expanded his teaching space to an airplane-hangar-sized fieldhouse and embarked on major world tours, leading large groups through follow-the-leader style "led" classes, in which verbal dictation of the practice structure came to stand in for the physical intimacy of the Mysore room. This hierarchical distancing of instructional authority became fully disembodied when Covid ended international travel and forced all long-distance social interaction into the networked audiovisual interface of Zoom.

The effects are paradoxical. While Jois' enormous practice space remains empty, through Zoom he has been able reach a broader global community than ever. In April, Jois led what may be the largest Ashtanga class ever, for over 950 global practitioners on Zoom. While geographic access is greatly increased through this audio-visual venue, what is lost in this and the many other mediated interventions Ashtanga instructors have since been pursuing (including more interactive Zoom-based Mysore rooms), is the sense of physical presence one feels practicing in the company of others, hearing their breath, feeling their body heat, and sharing in the affective resonance of not only real-time but real-space community.

Ty Landrum is one such instructor who, during the pandemic, attempted to use his sizable digital presence to simulate Mysore-style practice on Zoom. Landrum is the protege of Richard Freeman, a first-generation American Ashtanga practitioner and senior teacher who started the Yoga Workshop in Boulder, CO, in 1987, one of the longest-running Mysore-style shalas in the US. Landrum ran the Yoga Workshop in its final years before being priced out of the competitive

Boulder real estate market in 2019 and has spent much of the past several years traveling to teach Mysore-style Ashtanga intensives around the world.

When Covid quarantine made in-person instruction impossible, Landrum both began experimenting with online teaching formats and kept his only American teaching engagement—at the Boulder Shambhala Center from Aug. 17-29—on the books. In mid-June, Landrum confirmed via email that the program would go ahead in accordance with Colorado state social distancing mandates. This would be the first public event that the Shambhala Center had allowed to take place since the beginning of the pandemic, and the first opportunity for most in attendance to practice in a group configuration since the beginning of lock down. Under this configuration, everyone involved would have their temperature read prior to entering the building, they would wear masks whenever not actively practicing, and most profoundly, all physical touch would be forbidden, effectively forcing the intensive to move from a Mysore self-practice style to a led format.

In early August, Landrum announced that, due to the danger and difficulty of travel for most registered participants, the program would include a “virtual dimension.”¹ His assistant, David Chavez, a Mysore-style Ashtanga teacher based in Guadalajara, Mexico, would shift duties from physical assistance to running an audiovisual stream of the event on Zoom. None of the cameras would be turned on participants practicing at the Shambhala Center but the technical infrastructure would be present, literally occupying the physical space between in situ participants and Landrum himself. “We will take every measure to keep disruption to a minimum,” Landrum wrote in an email, but “the presence of the equipment, and the fact of live

¹ T. Landrum, personal communication, Aug. 4, 2020.

streaming, will of course be part of our reality.”² Balancing the tension of access and interruption that often accompanies mediation, Landrum acknowledged that the dual-format “immersion” would be a “maiden voyage” and “experiment” in both the technical and social dimension of yoga practice.³ “There is a seismic shift in the yoga world happening right now,” he wrote. “Things will never be the same,” yet “the phenomenon of people connecting over deep embodied experience simultaneously across different time zones is really incredible.”⁴

This language of experimental yoga practice harkens back to an early era in Ashtanga history, when Pattabhi Jois’ teaching center was dubbed the Ashtanga Yoga Research Institute. Landrum’s attempt to teach in mixed reality marks both a return to that spirit and an opportunity to investigate anew the effects of traditional techniques in shifting cultural and mediated configurations. Similarly, of all the social practices currently being reshaped during the Covid era by video conferencing platforms, Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga provides researchers interested in the “multidimensional concept of presence” a unique and deeply somatic opportunity to “compare human perceptions and responses in the context of technology with human perceptions and responses in contexts that do not involve technology” (International Society for Presence Research, 2000). Landrum’s mixed-reality yoga immersion provided a unique opportunity for both of these projects to be pursued in tandem. This autoethnography is a preliminary report, written from the dual perspective of practitioner and researcher, in dialogue with the instructor, assistant, and participants in both mediated spaces.

² T. Landrum, personal communication, Aug. 10, 2020.

³ T. Landrum, personal communication, Aug. 10, 2020.

⁴ T. Landrum, personal communication, Aug. 10, 2020.

Foundations for an Ethnography of Practice and Presence:

This dual perspective is not uncommon within the ethnographic literature concerning embodied practice. In his study of charismatic Christian practices, Thomas Csordas established embodiment as “a paradigm for anthropology” (1990) and as “the existential ground of culture and self” (1994), merging Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of the unconscious bodily *habitus* with Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s insight into somatic modes of perception and attention. Merleau-Ponty’s (1968) important articulation of the lived body’s dual perceptual status as subject and object (“chiasm”) is of particular use to my study of “retromediating” somatic technique. Tim Ingold’s contemporary “anthropology of skill” moved further toward a phenomenological understanding of “developmentally embodied capacities of attention and response,” complicating the representationalist assumption made throughout much social science that actions and gestures correspond to an implicit symbolic order of meaning (2001, 30). Greg Downey’s autoethnography of “virtuoso imitation” in the “master-disciple transmission” of the Brazilian martial art Capoeira directly influences my own work, modeling the dual stance of practitioner/ethnographer and furnishing my analysis of Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga practice with a method for understanding “corporeal mimesis” without the need for “theory” as a dimension toward which individual gestures relate (2010, s24-25). This approach is consonant with a popular aphorism often attributed to Pattabhi Jois in the early years of his teaching in which he told students that Ashtanga consisted of “99% practice, 1% theory” (Donahaye, 2010).

In observing his and other students’ assumption of their Capoeira teacher’s skill and physical comportment (across linguistic barriers), Downey concludes that “skill itself cannot be rendered as explicit declarative knowledge” (2010, s26). Instead, the “bodily turn” in such an

analysis figures “motor perception as inherently...intersubjective,” and thus meaningful. Landrum has expressed this same dynamic within his relationship to his teacher Richard Freeman. Upon first watching Freeman practice (via videos produced in the late 1980s that were later uploaded to YouTube), Landrum said, “I want to feel that; I want to feel what he’s feeling. I want to feel my body like that and have whatever experience of the world he’s having...” (Mulqueen, 2018). For Landrum, this initial mediated experience elicited not the desire to mimic an observed capacity or obtain a transferrable skill but rather to somatically enter the experience of his teacher. Downey calls this the “paradox of mimesis” (2010, s25) and usefully parses the immanence of virtuoso imitation from the performative reproduction dubbed “emulation.” In order to pursue this recursively embodied goal, Landrum shortened the mediated distance to his teacher by practicing the Mysore method under his direct tutelage for many years, eventually taking over teaching responsibilities at the Yoga Workshop.

By saying that he wanted to feel his body as though in his teacher’s body—a sentiment that I, in turn, shared in my aspiration to practice with Landrum—Landrum expresses a possibility for proprioceptive affect to cross the somatic gulf between bodies. Brian Massumi (1995) has laid the groundwork for theorizing this kind of affective resonance. Just as sensory modalities merge in an individual’s perceptual experience through the process of synesthesia (say, from a visual impression to a tactile response), affect can be understood as the autonomous field of “virtual synesthetic perspectives anchored in...the actually existing, particular things that embody them” (96). For Massumi, proprioception and interoception are key perceptual processes for the experience and exchange of affect, due to the immanence and invisibility of these bodily intensities. Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga’s “internal” techniques aim to directly operationalize these

intensities not through representational mimicry of the teacher’s gesture but instead through the student’s recursive internalization of the demonstrated form.

Downey observed that he and his fellow Capoeira students absorbed the affective comportment of their teacher, not as a set of rote techniques but as a sensibility for how the technique is embodied. Landrum and Freeman’s unique embodiment of the Ashtanga algorithm is perhaps most visible in a distinctive wave of the spine performed in transition between postures. While this breath-linked movement is generic to the *vinyasa* method, Freeman and Landrum exaggerate the gesture to imply an interoceptive relationship between the soft pallet and the pelvic floor, two ends of a medial pathway that is perceptually traversed with every breath⁵. To call this technique an “inner visualization” would be an ocularcentric distortion of a perceptual process that happens, by definition, out of view from both individual and social vantage points. Rather, the “inner” techniques of Ashtanga practice (the breath-accessed interior energetics of *bandha*) operate beyond the visual ascertainment of the teacher or a camera, existing solely through the outside-in interoceptive awareness of the practitioner themselves. This experience is empirically available to the practitioner regardless of how their exterior practice space is physically configured or mediated.

Drawing on Massumi’s formulations, new media theorist Mark Hansen regards the affective body as the ideal interface for encounters with digital information, positing that “embodied movement...can be leveraged to enact compelling experiences of presence in virtual environments” (Coley, 2019, xi). As global communications become increasingly mediated through digital platforms and protocols, social gatherings as somatically intensive as the one in

⁵ Landrum correlated this speculative space to the “primitive streak” described by embryology (Aug. 19, 2020).

Boulder are already affectively instigated through email, Instagram, YouTube, etc., suggesting that participation via Zoom may not be as approximate or amputated as one might at first imagine. The question is not how different forms of mediation distort a “pure” form of embodied practice, or simulate organic movement through digital verisimilitude, but rather how novel forms of mediated practice elucidate the various subject-object relationships apparent at these different registers. Taking the virtual here in its broadest, Deleuzian sense, as possible realms of perception and action, Ashtanga Yoga’s focus on interoceptive and proprioceptive techniques allows for the enactment of presence in two separate mediated directions: First, in a retro-mediated (anatomically medial) direction from the physical environment within which the individual is practicing toward speculative attention points inside the practitioner’s body; second—and as an extension of the first revelation, that presence is enacted through the rendering power of the physiological apparatus—outward through both first-order physical space and across the mediated boundary of the teleconference platform to a sense of social “co-presence,” within which the first register of presence is continually possible.

The Virtual Mandala:

The Boulder Shambhala Center has functioned as a hub for cultural exchange since its founding by Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche in 1970. Recent scholarship by James Mallinson (2020) tracking the textual origins of hatha yoga to Vajrayana Buddhism make the location of more than coincidental interest to Landrum’s Ashtanga intensive. The center’s “shrine room” is a capacious hall with tall ceilings, filigreed architectural features, and regal ornamentation. Large technicolor mandalas hang on several walls, depicting complex Buddhist

cosmologies radiating concentrically from the central figure of Avalokiteshvara and other Buddhist avatars situated at the *bindu* (center point). Seated on a low stage before 20 socially distanced students and two video cameras streaming to over 100 students around the world, Landrum used the metaphor of the mandala to conceptualize how this hybrid community would inhabit a common practice space.

The word “immersion” is often used in communities of practice to characterize an intensive workshop, retreat, or study opportunity. Within the field of performing arts and multimodal media technologies, the same term is used to describe an all-encompassing, sensorily rich aesthetic experience. Landrum’s metaphor of the virtual mandala allowed for the notion of immersion to bridge these contexts. In the months of quarantine preceding the Boulder immersion, Landrum had been teaching exclusively on Zoom, broadcasting live classes to a large international community of practitioners, but said that the feeling on his side of the camera lens was vacant, like “teaching into the virtual void, not sure if anyone was on the other side of the screen.”⁶ The sentiment was echoed by Bob, a longtime student of Landrum’s who had travelled in past years to participate in the Boulder intensive and had been taking Landrum’s Zoom classes throughout 2020. Invoking Marshall McLuhan’s classic (1964) temperature metaphor for a medium’s degree of experiential engagement, Bob called the YouTube classes “too cool” and lacking “presence.” This was his motivation to make the drive from Ohio to practice with Landrum in person.⁷

⁶ T. Landrum, personal communication, Aug. 16, 2020.

⁷ Personal communication, Aug. 16, 2020.

Many practitioners on the other side of Landrum’s screen lacked this privilege of mobility. As many international participants cancelled their travel plans, the online ranks of the immersion grew to include many who would not have been able to travel to Boulder in the first place. While David Chavez made the trip to Boulder from Guadalajara, many of his students tuned in via the web feed, facilitated and moderated by Chavez, whose role as “assistant” shifted from physical adjustments and instruction to tech support. Most surprising to Landrum was the large number of students jumping time zones to take class from parts of Europe, Israel, and India.⁸

“Can everyone in virtual space hear me?” Landrum asked at the start of each session, speaking into the microphones in his Apple AirPods, which he wore throughout each physically rigorous session. It was up to Chavez to give him visual affirmation based on the online response, which was most of the time muted for Landrum, due to the presence of disruptive background noises (cats, machinery, etc.), and visually out-of-view, due to the seeming impossibility of visually tracking more than 100 practitioners on a laptop screen in real time.⁹ Participants instead used the chat feature in Zoom to ask questions, which were in turn relayed by Chavez or fielded at a break.

The mandala begins at the *bindu*, the central hub of the expansive speculative geography, and Landrum suggested we imagine the Shambhala shrine room as this point. Imbued with the “palpable presence” of generations of practitioners and teachers, the room was described as the origin point of a meaningful vibration (*spanda*) that expanded outward through the virtual rings

⁸ T. Landrum, personal communication, Aug. 16, 2020.

⁹ By contrast, in leading 900-plus practitioners on Zoom, Sharath Jois would often say, “I can see you” as verbal affirmation of his visual presence (Jois, 2020).

of the mandala, spanning geography and time zones to connect each spatially distant but temporally synchronous practitioner to a “very powerful nexus of energy.”¹⁰ Elaborating this notion in one of his many lectures (Aug. 19, 2020) on Tantric metaphysics, Landrum introduced the notion of *kanchukas*, the contraction of non-local consciousness into an individual organism, a process that both ontologically distinguishes us in isolation from others but also gives us the motivation, indeed the longing, to connect with one another.

Within the immersive multi-platform mandala, this connection was enacted in a variety of ways. In one instance (Aug. 16, 2020), Landrum described a “dialectic” between the teacher and the group, mediated primarily by means of the teacher’s voice and visual feedback from the practicing members. This dynamic was more apparently reciprocal within the Boulder shrine room and more unidirectional in Landrum’s broadcast to participants on Zoom. This formal impediment to easy bidirectional interaction on Zoom was a major reason for the program’s shift from the asynchronous Mysore format to a synchronized led format that could work temporally across mediated spaces. Other Mysore style teachers have experimented with different configurations and video conferencing platforms to overcome this challenge, but a common paradigm has yet to emerge. As Landrum both verbally called the Ashtanga algorithm and concurrently demonstrated its embodied instantiations on camera, the tempo of shared breath served as a mechanism for synchronizing the movement and experience of practitioners in both spaces. As a carrier of both attention and intention, the “collective intelligence of the breath” was

¹⁰ T. Landrum, personal correspondence, Aug. 16, 2020.

uniquely suited to expanding “out through the mandala into virtual space,” a process through which, Landrum said, “the experience of the breath becomes intersubjective.”¹¹

As a shared exhale enacts the expansive register of co-presence atmospherically across the shrine room and audibly/affectively into the individual practice rooms of those joining via Zoom, the shared inhale contracts into another spatial/affective register, experienced within the body of each practitioner. Important for both a yogic and technological notion of presence is that “presence is a property of an individual and varies across people and time; it is not a property of a technology” (International Society for Presence Research, 2000). Therefore, the social experience of co-presence is neither an affordance of the physical architectural or networked media infrastructure, but rather as a bodily enactment that does not exist as spatially a priori.

Coley (2019) has convincingly shown this with regard to the role of directional movement in the enactment of presence in VR game space. In this context, presence is achieved through a kind of perceptual deception, whereby 2nd order stimuli fully replace 1st order sense perception and elicit somatic response, in effect drawing the practitioner into a completely digital space that renders according to the user’s navigation. This is consistent with ISPR’s seminal definition of presence as “subjective perception in which even though part or all of an individual’s current experience is generated by and/or filtered through human-made technology, part or all of the individual’s perception fails to accurately acknowledge the role of the technology in the experience” (2000). This technological deception is, however, less relevant to an analysis of video telecommunications platforms like Zoom, where the process of augmenting reality serves less to transport the user into a virtual space than to retrieve real spaces from a

¹¹ T. Landrum, personal correspondence, Aug. 19, 2020.

virtual elsewhere and render them in the user's primary physical reality. Unlike VR platforms that serve as portals to different perceptual realities that are enacted upon entrance, Zoom may be better understood as a hall of two-way mirrors that reveal equally "real" realities on both sides of the looking glass. Therefore, rather than speaking of social co-presence as something that either is or is not achieved in a mediated encounter, we should speak of the shifting degrees to which it is intersubjectively enacted from moment to moment. This evaluation becomes useful not only for the geographically distant participant whose experience of "being there" is afforded/limited by internet bandwidth, size of laptop screen, etc., but also for the physically proximate participant, whose experience of "being here" is afforded/limited by the distance between yoga mats, limitation of physical touch, ambient smells, etc. Johannes Goebel's notion of the "human scale" in "immersive" artistic environments is useful here for shifting our focus from the source of the stimuli (analog vs. digital, physical vs. virtual, etc.) toward the manner and degree to which it "reaches our senses" and therefore "makes sense" (2010, 55). While the "content" of the yoga intensive is consistent across the immediate and mediated spaces, what differs is the scale at which it reaches the practitioner. In either case, what results is an ecological relationship between the practitioner's environment and their perceptual experience, which might be described as different by degree and not by type. This is consistent with ISPR's assertion that "it is likely that our initial and immediate responses to external stimuli (i.e., sensations) are identical when the external stimuli are created by or filtered through technology and when the external stimuli are not created by or filtered through technology" (2000).

This understanding of "the affective body's enaction of virtual spaces and its relation to sensations of presence" (Coley, 2019, 1) opens the more radical possibility of describing the

varieties of virtual, interoceptive presence experientially accessible through Ashtanga yoga's "inner" techniques. There is a long multi-disciplinary discourse on subtle body phenomenology punctuated by failed measures to empirically validate these elusive ontologies through autopsy and other material investigations. My project is not to follow in this discourse or defend any particular metaphysics but rather to propose a common descriptive framework for both the experience of presence enacted in social space and that subjectively obscured from social interrogation. This move may, however, test the limits of ISPR's definition of presence as derived from "telepresence," since the interoceptive varieties of presence explored here "do not involve a misperception regarding the role of human-made technology in experience (i.e., the distinction between 'first order' and 'second order' mediated experience)," but rather relate "to the broader conception of the term 'presence' (i.e., not a shortened version of 'telepresence') because they concern misperceptions in 'first order' mediated experience" (2000).

If the breath is a directional vector of attention and intention, then it may be followed both outward into experiences of social co-presence and inward toward subtle interoceptions. Tantric metaphysics charts these affective intensities (*prana*) in speculative conduits (*nadi*) pervading the physical form, but rather than existing a priori, Landrum describes them as only ontologically present when enacted by yoga practice. That is, the subtle body, like perceptually convincing digital spaces, can only be said to exist when consciously encountered. Just as there is no social co-presence without the intersubjective flow of affect, there is no subtle body phenomenology without the flow of breath, which serves as the medium for interoceptive

awareness and can be followed into ever-subtler intensities through the technical refinement of *bandha*.

Within Ashtanga orthopraxy, this experience should be available throughout the practice, regardless of how physically gymnastic or demonstrably extroverted a posture may appear. However, many practitioners report easier access to this experience through subtler moments of prolonged concentration, namely in seated meditation or in supine rest. To this effect, yoga *nidra* (sleep) is a method Landrum included in his immersion, and was offered by his wife Shayan Landrum on four separate afternoons. Since practitioners receive this technique passively as a verbally guided inner visualization, laying with eyes closed in whatever physical space they may occupy, the experience of yoga *nidra* should not depend greatly on whether the participant is physically proximate to the guide or listening via Zoom.¹² Following an initial intention not to fall asleep, the practitioner follows the guide's voice to an awareness of a series of sites within their own body, encouraged to synesthetically "feel the presence" of a "white light" in each finger tip, elbow, shoulder, throat, etc.

The effects of the yoga *nidra* practice were reported by some as subtle to the degree of inducing sleep and by others as intense to the point of inducing outward emotional release. Practitioners both in Boulder and joining remotely (like Alit in Tel Aviv) were eager to discuss not only the physical particularities of the inner techniques but also to share the peculiarities of their experience in yoga *nidra*. These efforts toward "intersubjective corroboration" (Gallagher and Zahavi, 2008, 28) of subtle body experience suggest to me, as practicing observer, an innate

¹² In this way, Zoom-based Yoga Nidra could be usefully compared to Tamar Gordon's extensive studies of Zoom-based seances and psychic mediumship, as well as research on user experience of various meditation apps.

affinity between classical phenomenological methods of inquiry and the “radical empiricism” practiced historically through the heterogeneous traditions of yoga.

Conclusion:

These reflections are far from a comprehensive analysis of the “seismic shift” Landrum diagnosed as presently occurring within Covid-era yoga practice, or even a complete mapping of his “maiden voyage” into mixed reality Ashtanga instruction. Instead, this account should be read as one report in the “intersubjective corroboration” currently playing out in many communities of practice that are experimenting with new social formats and media configurations to find a way for individuals to stay present in each others’ lives and connected to the practices that sustain them. Even with the end of social distancing, it is unlikely that these new mixed reality communities will fully recede. Just as newer registers of mediation reveal the taken-for-granted registers that they overtake, Landrum’s Zoom-based yoga intervention helped reveal a more primary mediation that had been hiding in plain, interoceptive sight. The digital device is by now a standard “prop” for contemporary yoga practice, and some, like Kenneth Rose (2020) suggest that the integration of networked virtual reality technology with traditional contemplative practices could enact a new collective subtle body—the “yantramayakosha”—akin to Landrum’s virtual mandala. “Presence” offers an important analytic for mapping both the infrastructural configuration of this emerging paradigm and the lived experience that takes place within it.

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