



## THE ARROW

*A JOURNAL OF WAKEFUL SOCIETY, CULTURE & POLITICS*

*The Arrow* explores the relationship between contemplative practice, politics, and activism. We investigate topics in politics, economics, ecology, conflict transformation, and the social sciences. Inspired by the vision of meditation masters Chögyam Trungpa and Sakyong Mipham for a “union of social life and spiritual wakefulness” in society, *The Arrow* provides a critical and much needed space for investigating the meeting point of contemplative wisdom and pressing issues of climate change, racism, inequality, and conflict.

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## Domes of the Body: Yoga, Alignment, and Social Justice

by BECKY THOMPSON

### Abstract

*While we have witnessed spectacular growth in yoga in the last twenty years, many activist yogis are concerned about multiple inequalities that threaten to cut yoga from its roots, compromising its core healing powers. This article examines somatic principles that address current post-colonial, race, class, and gender inequalities, specifically how five domes of the body—the arch in the foot, the perineum, the diaphragm, the palate and the crown at the top of the head—reveal current contestations. The domes represent a middle way—a path toward physical, psychic and spiritual alignment. Drawing upon yoga philosophy, justice studies and multiracial feminism helps us to see how individual alignment depends upon collective vision. As a long time yoga practitioner, scholar, and social justice activist I write seeking ways for yoga to nurture us as individuals and communities seeking justice and wholeness.*

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**Keywords:** yoga, social justice, intersectionality, de-colonization, healing, multiracial feminism, domes

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*Note:* Original haikus are by the author.

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**I**N THE LAST twenty years, we have witnessed a spectacular growth in the practice of yoga, with more than 21 million people practicing in the United States alone.<sup>1</sup> Those seeking yoga frequently find it to be effective in dealing with stress and coping with health concerns, and to be less hard on the body than many sports. As people rethink their relationship to organized religion, many see yoga as a way to practice principles that religion encourages: patience, compassion, and a mindful approach to solving problems. Even those who seek out and thrive in the most physical of practices (Bikram, Ashtanga, power yoga) often find a deepening sense of connectedness and accountability to themselves and other people. Leading yogi Rolf Gates also sees yoga as a powerful antidote to patriarchy, as the overwhelmingly female make-up of those practicing yoga allows men to find a feminine side, to take direction from female teachers, and to nurture patience, quiet, and ease.

While these factors carry us some distance in appreciating why yoga has the following it does, those of us who have been watching the mushrooming of yoga also have many concerns—particularly the way that social inequalities threaten to cut yoga from its roots, severing itself from its core healing powers. Yoga is increasingly represented as a physical asana practice for white, wealthy, and able-bodied people; further, its multiple philosophical roots are largely hidden, including its grounding in meditation and its role as a practice toward collective liberation.<sup>2</sup> Corporate representations focus on a certain demographic, even as grassroots yoga is practiced in a stunning range of locations: community centers, prisons, schools, church and synagogue basements, and many other sites.<sup>3</sup> While the explosion of yoga studios in tourist locations globally speaks to a hunger for relaxation and gentle movement, this growth also reflects long-standing power inequities, where local residents rarely have the resources to practice in studios in their own cities and towns.

While critiques of these inequalities have increased in recent years—spearheaded by South Asian practitioners weary of ways yoga has been coopted, by Black women frustrated by how whiteness is practiced in many yoga studios, and by LGBT practitioners who often feel marginalized by heteronormative dialogue—working toward solutions have seemed formidable.<sup>4</sup> As a white woman who is part of a multiracial family and who teaches yoga in a historically black/multiracial neighborhood in Boston, I am aware that many people yearn

for a social justice-based approach to yoga, one that takes seriously how racism, sexism, heterosexism, colonialism, and other inequities have been woven into the fabric of mainstream yoga. While initially seeking solutions based on direct action and confrontation, over time I began to understand that somatic principles in yoga—represented in the “domes” of the body—offer tools for undoing inequalities. I also became aware that these solutions are already manifesting themselves in grassroots, democratic yoga communities both domestically and globally.

In yoga anatomy, there is an understanding of the body as containing a series of *domes*—the arch in the foot is a dome, the perineum is a dome, the diaphragm is a dome, the top of the mouth (the palate) is a dome, and the sweet open spot at the top of the head is a dome.<sup>5</sup> While these domes connect energetically with the chakras, they also have their own anatomical structure that can offer us wisdom about how our bodies fall in and out of balance. The domes exist within the realm of “moving waters”; they literally float in the body’s fluid, just as these imbalances are floating now within a larger social structure. The body is in balance, in alignment, when the circumference of these domes carries equal pressure. The five domes in the body can be visualized as tools for seeking individual alignment, but they also can teach us what is hindering collective alignment. Each dome reveals why social justice work is essential for seeking collective liberation.

## Dome in the Arch of the Foot

*around this dome  
toes and heels rock us to earth  
gravity plays*

In yogic terms, all poses begin with the feet, with the standing posture, *tādāsana*, also known as mountain pose. *Tādāsana* is considered the basis of all balancing poses, as well as its horizontal version, high plank, and its upside down versions, headstand and handstand. Resting comfortably and in alignment in *tādāsana* depends upon experiencing our rootedness in the earth, roots that extend far deeper than the earth’s surface. We are not leaning to the left or the right, the front or the back, but rather have the body’s pressure equally distributed around the entire circumference of the dome, working in balance with gravity. This is a key reason why we understand yoga as an earth-based

practice—the ability to stand in what Patañjali emphasized as comfort and ease—depends upon feeling our rootedness, our belonging to, and dependence upon the earth.<sup>6</sup>

The problem with being able to experience this fundamental principle, however, is that the land where people practice yoga in the United States was stolen by white people, a historical reality that we have not yet come to terms with as a society.<sup>7</sup> Buddhist scholar and professor Rick Jarow has said that people in the United States are destined to be anxious, nervous, and defensive as long as we don't acknowledge and deal with our shaky relationship to the land on which we practice.<sup>8</sup> Whether such acknowledgement includes comprehensive reparations; a formal apology by the U.S. government for atrocities committed; removing laws, policies and traditions that keep many nations/tribes in poverty; or freeing Leonard Peltier from prison (or a combination of all of these); these priorities become relevant for yogis seeking to experience balance in how we sit, stand, walk, and love in the world.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, one way that many in the United States have avoided such a commitment has been to export yoga to resorts, tourist spots, and vacation destinations with the idea that “getting away” can bring more relaxation and hence fulfillment in one's yoga practice. Typically these retreats have little or no attachment to the locations where they are offered. The prices, cuisine, music, sexual practices, clothing, and yoga teachers are not connected to the locations—in Costa Rica, Mexico, Bali, and South Africa—and the studios closely resemble tourist resorts, with staff from the area who have neither the time nor the money to benefit from these same yoga programs.

Yoga tourism doesn't solve the issue of being on shaky ground since so many of the yoga retreats are in places deeply affected by U.S. colonialism—tourism being a 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century version of U.S. imperialism. Although I don't think such venues are, by definition, corrupt, I do believe that yoga practitioners need to consider what it means to be in solidarity with people where we practice. Are the studios where we travel really accessible to the people living there? Is the practitioner's only relationship with the people living in the local communities one of customer and server? Is the retreat center really giving back to the community? Is the yoga being practiced by the people who have lived there recognized as yoga or as another respected body practice? What is the history of the land base where the center was built? Who was on the land before? Where are these people now? There is a big difference, for example, between highly publicized yoga studios in Ubud Bali—

which were built by Westerners and are only theoretically accessible to the people who live there—as compared to the International Women’s Partnership for Peace and Justice (IWP) in Northern Thailand. IWP’s co-founder, Ouyporn Khuankaew, grew up and still lives in that community where she, co-founder Ginger Norwood, and many women from the area hand-built the meditation and retreat center from earth-made bricks. IWP’s primary commitment is to serve the people of that region and to nurture social change.

The export of yoga to vacation destinations is related to the popular tendency to look to the East for spiritual guidance, based on the common assumption that yoga’s roots are primarily Asian. Without a doubt, much of what we practice in the United States has roots in India. But Orientalism in yoga takes the shape of, for example, representing yoga poses as “authentic,” ancient, and pure, coming from the land of henna hands and silk saris.<sup>10</sup> This portrayal persists even as scholarly work on yoga history has uncovered that many pretzel poses we now teach are barely a hundred years old, a combination of gymnastics and stretching routines that have been authenticated by a mythical, multi-colored East.<sup>11</sup>

When we romanticize all things Asian, we often fail to acknowledge that yoga is, by definition, earth-based—that the land from which yoga originated and the land where we now practice both matter. In a gutsy keynote at a Buddhist leadership conference, Buddhist scholar Jan Willis talked about the western tendency to cherry-pick, cutting spiritual practices from their roots, selectively practicing some aspects of the tradition while leaving the rest.<sup>12</sup> An example of this in yoga is the tendency for people to be exposed to only one of the eight limbs of yoga, the asana, with little or no direct exposure to the other seven limbs, in particular to the ethical presumptions: nonviolence, truthfulness, purity, contentment, self study, devotion, non-grasping, non-hoarding, and sexual responsibility. Reducing yoga to an asana practice allows us to get fit while sidestepping ethical traditions that could guide us in our own actions now.

Understanding yoga as an earth-based, ethical practice is a way to recognize its complexity. The Buddha was sitting under a Bodhi tree when he found enlightenment. The *Śramanic* yogis were seekers and wanderers in a specific land and time.<sup>13</sup> As old as the Eastern traditions are, or maybe older, are somatic practices and philosophical systems of Indigenous people in what we now call the United States.<sup>14</sup> Sweat lodges, vision quests, sitting in silence, cedarling, working with ener-

getic pathways in the body, and seeking teachers for spiritual guidance are key somatic practices on this land.<sup>15</sup> For example, studying the Native American Code of Ethics alongside the *Yoga Sutras* reveals deep resonance between the two.<sup>16</sup> The First Native ethic—“Rise with the sun to pray. Pray alone. Pray often. The Great Spirit will listen, if only you listen”—resonates with *Yoga Sutras* one, two, three, and fourteen: “And now the teaching on yoga begins (1); Yoga is the settling of the mind into silence (2); When the mind has settled we are established in our essential nature, which is unbounded consciousness (3); The practice of yoga will be firmly rooted when it is maintained consistently and with dedication over the long period (14).”<sup>17</sup> This sutra’s emphasis on rootedness and devotion to practice resonates with the Native ethic’s directive to “rise with the sun” and “pray often.” Another resonance: The third Native ethic says: “Search for yourself, by yourself. Do not allow others to make your path for you. It is your road and yours alone. Others may walk with you, but no one can walk it for you.” That sounds like *svādhyāya*, the fourth *niyama*, which encourages self-knowledge, self study and reflections. (See Appendix I for more parallels.) Recognizing resonance between these two philosophical traditions is not meant to conflate them, but rather to understand shared wisdom in both systems and to give accountability to the people who have been the guardians to this land prior to and since colonialism. For example, two precepts, non-stealing (*asteya*) and non-hoarding (*aparigraha*), offer ethical guidance for resisting historical and contemporary settler colonialism.

The promise of finding alignment in the dome of the foot by experiencing the roots that extend from the feet to the earth is that people are connected to the earth and to all sentient and non-sentient beings.<sup>18</sup> These roots, of course, need to be cultivated, since once it is possible to witness this belonging, many actions become unacceptable to us: to desecrate the earth or ourselves, to allow for pipelines to be built on land that is sacred to Native people, and to allow refugees to die in perilous seas. The presence made possible by connecting to the earth nurtures a desire to treat ourselves and others with great tenderness and generosity. The dome of the foot carries this promise and dream.

## Dome of the Perineum

*sweet when the flowers  
open to dawn new life this day  
periwinkle grows*

From the ground up, the second dome in the body is the perineum: the diamond-shaped area of the groin that can be visualized as two flowers, one opening to the body's precious core and the other to the earth.<sup>19</sup> The perineum may be the strongest area in the body—capable of stretching so much that it allows an entirely new life to enter the world. In its resting state, it is the energetic portal connecting the seated human body to the earth when we are sitting, its flow undulating between the front sex organs and back (moving north and south), the left and right pelvic bone (east and west), and all points in between.<sup>20</sup> When in a sitting position, the perineum floats up from the earth as the dome in the arch of the foot floats from the earth when we are standing.

Alignment in a sitting position is built from all the edges of this dome when consciousness is evenly spread and relaxed, with the perimeter of the perineum directed toward the earth with the dome extending upwards. When this dome is in alignment, it is then possible to begin to access the front and back body. In yoga philosophy, the front body is what we present to those we meet, our conscious selves, the energy we give to the world. The back body is our unconscious selves, what we do not necessarily present to the public or to ourselves. It is where our fears, hopes, anxieties, and imagination live. It is also the seat of what we hide, what we do not yet know consciously but have somatically registered. On an individual level, gaining access to the unconscious self is often the basis of finding our higher calling, our purpose, our passion—our dharma. This is the essence of Patañjali's third sutra, "When the mind has settled, we are established in our essential nature, which is unbounded consciousness."<sup>21</sup>

Alignment in the body occurs when we are equally in the front and back body, when all of the edges of the perineum are evenly reaching toward the earth. A huge impediment to this alignment, however, is an obsession with the front body in most Western yoga. This focus comes in the form of using mirrors in studios to look at the front body (while the back body is not reflected), and the position of the teacher to the student (each looking at each other's front bodies). It includes cues



that primarily rely upon front body parts. While down dog, rabbit, and child's pose all include the presentation of the back body, the vast majority of asana feature and cue on the front body.

This focus also includes the normative teaching of chakras as front body power sources even though the most powerful accessing of the chakras typically occurs from the back body. The disproportionate attention to the front body speaks to a culture geared toward superficiality, and a culture running from deeper knowledge about our violent past—including its history of slavery, genocide, and colonialism. Seeking alignment through the perineum asks us to deal with how dominant U.S. culture has “whitewashed” or justified historical and current violence (sexual abuse, homophobia, poverty, Islamophobia, etc.). And it illustrates that many of our prejudices and internalized oppression are lodged in our unconscious selves—dismissed, minimized, and ignored. Giving attention to the back body, which comes in part through our awareness of the perineum and its connection to the spine, is a step toward tapping into memory, denial, fear, and confusion woven into oppressive structures. While it may be possible to quiet individual anxieties that emerge as we work with the domes of the foot and the perineum, much nervousness and defensiveness will remain with us until we face knowledge stored in the back body. Giving primary attention to the front body robs us of access to the power sources that live in the back body. It keeps us from facing essential truths about our individual and collective lives and keeps us out of alignment as a culture.

## Dome of the Diaphragm

*heart and diaphragm  
are in love, singing da dah, da dah da day  
no matter what*

The dome of the diaphragm is one of the most interesting in the human body. As a large muscle that stretches across the perimeter of the base of the ribs, its structure expands and contracts with each breath. It can be visualized as an umbrella that opens on an inhale (to make room for more oxygen) and closes slightly on the exhale. While teacher trainings in the United States typically give attention to the diaphragm as a key muscle in the body, the tendency is to focus solely on the diaphragm as a muscle, not as an energetic seat. In his fascinating research on craniosacral healing, Hugh Milne writes that “clients with height-

ened sensitivity to their own dense body structures” can feel energetic interactions among the domes of the body. He asserts that it is vital for healers to experience this interrelationship “as real, not simply as an academic notion.”<sup>22</sup>

The diaphragm is the only muscle in the body that is semi-striated—both striated like other skeletal muscles (and therefore under our voluntary control) and a smooth muscle like other internal organs (and therefore not easily consciously controlled).<sup>23</sup> In yoga philosophy there are five sheaths of the body—the physical, mental, emotional, energetic, and bliss body—each speaking to a unique quality of our embodiment. This focus on the diaphragm as a striated muscle is part of a larger tendency to emphasize the physical body, while minimizing or ignoring the energetic body.

While much yoga teaches people to breathe deeply (to extend the breath from the lungs into the diaphragm), such attention typically focuses on the physical benefits of such breath (developing calm and attentive focus during practice). These teachings typically encourage people to make it slower and more conscious. A less discussed benefit of mindful breathing is how slowing down and quieting ourselves can facilitate social justice. While there has been a rapid succession of social traumas in the United States in the last twenty years—the 9/11 attacks, Hurricane Katrina, the school-to-prison pipeline, the rise of Islamophobia, to name a few—we have barely begun to understand how larger societal injustices including white supremacy and classism undergird these traumas. Slowing down and breathing deeply with gentle attention to the diaphragm, particularly within a community, can begin to bring awareness to our position within these social injustices when mindful breathing is paired with honest conversations about these issues and activism to address them.<sup>24</sup>

In *Radical Dharma*—a pioneering book about how racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism stand in the way of collective awakening—the three Black Buddhist authors illuminate how a commitment to sitting together, mindful breathing, and truth-telling can move us to a new place of consciousness. One of the authors, Reverend angel Kyodo williams writes, “as a result of privilege, white practitioners (and teachers) have mistakenly entitled themselves to place the lens of awareness inside of whiteness, hence they are unable to see its machinations.”<sup>25</sup> It is difficult to get outside of a belief system, a habit, or a convention if we are buried within it. Yoga and meditation that work at a level deeper than words can help people find a space outside estab-

lished oppressive constructs. Awareness of the diaphragm (and subtle breath) and its connection to the perineum—which also taps into the back body—can help us access our shadow self, our back body knowledge.

This back body knowledge can help us understand how we have been racialized, gendered, sexualized—how systems of domination are encoded in our bodies. In her writing about “radical dharma” (meditation within communities working toward social justice), Jasmine Syedullah describes whiteness as a “captivity narrative” that she was stuck inside of for most of her life until she began deep work as part of a sangha committed to liberation.<sup>26</sup> She writes, “I had been at home in whiteness so long I had no idea how abandoned I felt in my own body.”<sup>27</sup> Through deep reflection in community, Syedullah says, “it was a blessing to be practicing with people who were investing in falling out of love with innocence, invisibility and compartmentalization.”<sup>28</sup> As the seat of breath, the diaphragm serves both as a physical and symbolic presence within our bodies reminding us of our yearning to be free. This is the essence of the fourth limb of yoga, pranayama, conscious breathing, that increases our life energy (sutra 49) while taking us “beyond the domain of inner and outer” (sutra 51) to the mind’s luminosity (sutra 52).<sup>29</sup>

A second unique characteristic of the diaphragm is that it provides the nest for the heart. The heart literally nestles in the diaphragm. A breath that is soft, uncontrolled, and expansive will inevitably have a different effect on the heart than one that is measured, controlled, and strong. Visualizing the diaphragm as a living, undulating, and floating presence (rather than simply a mechanical muscle) and the heart as its companion allows for more layers of awareness of how to connect with the heart.

A common cue (i.e. instruction) in yoga is to open the heart (which is typically a front body instruction), which assumes that an open heart is safe and necessary. This assumption doesn’t recognize the benefits of protecting the heart. Sometimes, an instruction to open the heart takes for granted that the world is a safe place, which is typically not true for marginalized communities—people of color, the very young and old, people with disabilities, trauma survivors, and others. In this way, a yoga practice that takes power inequities into account makes room for protecting the heart, for guiding people to find safe spaces in the back body, including space to rest on top of the diaphragm in the back of the heart. Understanding the dome of the diaphragm as both a muscle and

organ, and making room for safe space in the body has the potential to heal the imbalance that occurs in front body-dominant, controlled breath. Once safety in the back body can be accessed, the spiritual warriorship involved in opening the heart—even though the world often feels scary—may be possible.<sup>30</sup> This is the work and the pleasure of the diaphragm as it cradles the heart.

## Dome of the Palate

*jangled nerves threaten  
to tighten the jaw until  
words take easy flight*

The dynamics experienced in the diaphragm reverberate in the fourth dome—the palate. The palate, aptly referred to as the roof of the mouth, is a tender and sensitive place. In popular vernacular the palate is often associated with being able to experience subtle differences in the flavor, body, and tone of fine food and drink. The palate is held up as the symbolic location for fine aesthetics, discriminating taste. The palate registers immediately if food is too hot or too cold. It goes numb if food is unhealthy or too strong. Its ridges are like tiny ribbons in a tide. Like other body domes the palate is wrapped in fluid and is flexible. It is constant company for the tongue, which cuddles up to the palate when we are thoughtful, playful, or stressed.<sup>31</sup> And the palate accommodates the teeth. Energetically, the palate is a portal between the lower jaw and the brain, between the diaphragm and the crown dome. And it is private to all, except perhaps when kissing is taking place, a most private space to behold.

The imbalance we can see at the level of the palate takes place when, as poet and sheep herder Mary O’Reilley says, “stories get caught in our throats,” when they cannot find their way outside of the body.<sup>32</sup> The stories boomerang off the sides of the throat, bump around in the dark of the palate. These trapped stories can easily make you lose your appetite or never feel satiated.<sup>33</sup> The energy of the throat is one of standing up and stating your rights. It is the source of song, poetry, and speech, as well as the deep calm of restful silence. As Hugh Milne writes, the “throat soul is where we connect what we see with what we say, and also with what we feel.”<sup>34</sup> The key imbalance in this dome is forced silence in its many manifestations.

In yoga, this imbalance has manifested in difficulties in dealing with trauma. While it makes intuitive sense that many people who come to the mat have faced various traumas, until recently there has been hesitation to deal with that openly. I am thinking for example, of the experience of Angela Farmer who wrote:

In 2008 I offered a workshop on trauma and yoga for the Yoga Journal conference in San Francisco but had to disguise the title as the organizers said that the subject was inappropriate. Sixty-eight women showed up and I was blown away by their stories of assault, sexual abuse, and massive trauma. These women were mostly mothers with families, held successful jobs and careers and to look at, were strong and well balanced in their lives. But to scrape the surface, there was another devastating picture. It is not one day too soon to address this subject with yoga teachers and practitioners.<sup>35</sup>

Of course, difficulties in yoga communities with dealing effectively and compassionately with trauma is part of a larger pattern in contemporary society where we witness sensationalized coverage of trauma in the mass media while space for expressing its reality in authentic and quiet voices is still scary and considered taboo for many.<sup>36</sup> Some of this hesitation is a consequence of trauma itself—how the overwhelming, flooding experience leaves people thinking that we have made the trauma up or that the consequences of the trauma are unimportant.<sup>37</sup> But some of this difficulty comes from within yoga communities themselves, as not enough people have the experience, support, and resources to know how to listen deeply to practitioners who have faced racism, sexual abuse, addictions, imprisonment, and other injuries.

In studios, imbalances in the palate dome manifest themselves in a top-down structure where practitioners do not feel free to talk about what they are experiencing on the mat—when practice leaves us overwhelmed, overexposed, and disoriented. The heaviness in the air when the word “trauma” is mentioned and the tendency to pass people tissues (clean it up, fix it, get over it) are both common signs that we have work to do as a community for this dome of the body to find ease.

In addition, we will need to gain clarity that survivors of trauma are the experts on the subject. While we are witnessing a new cadre of professionals who are working with trauma survivors, this upsurge in professional interest runs the risk of creating protocols, standards, and guidelines that have not fully taken into account the voices and lived experience of trauma survivors.

We are in a moment where grassroots healing, including that done in self-help groups, runs the risk of being sucked into a medicalized treatment model that focuses on quantification with rubrics and studies. Similarly, professionalization in yoga teacher trainings discourages self-disclosure—as if yoga teachers with trauma histories will somehow be less effective teachers. A balanced approach may be one in which grassroots, community-based knowledge of trauma and healing can be respected alongside—even considered integral to—medical approaches to treatment, and in which professionalism can make space for self reflection and honesty about our lived experiences.

We also need an expansive understanding of what constitutes trauma—not only sexual abuse and physical accidents, but also police brutality, the injuries caused by incarceration, and the fallout from addictions. We need a big understanding of trauma and an ever bigger understanding of how yoga communities can be in alignment with the healing process. Trauma survivors have much to teach us—we are the canaries in the mine, alerting us that poisoned air cannot sustain us.

## Dome at the Crown: The Roof to the Sky

*may I treat this place well  
offer water to the birds  
ribbon earth to sky*

Of the five alignment domes in the body, the round ring at the top of the head is the only one that is directed upwards, perhaps to offer a metaphorical birdbath for hummingbirds that we carry on our heads. The crown dome, the conduit between the body and clouds, between the body and sky, is a fluid area. In fact, when babies are born the spot is so soft that great care needs to be taken to protect it.

This early knowing may be why the Muscogee poet Joy Harjo wrote, “At birth we know everything, can see into the shimmer of complexity. When a newborn looks at you it is with utter comprehension. We know where we are coming from, where we have been. And then we forget it all. That’s why infants sleep so much after birth. It is an adjustment.”<sup>38</sup> Joy Harjo’s quote makes us wonder what it would be like if the world was able to protect everybody’s heads with the same attentiveness and care that is shown to infants—to see our heads as precious and forever vulnerable. And what kind of deep rest all of us

might benefit from by relying upon the awareness that flows through the crown dome.

In order for the crown dome to be in alignment, all of the domes below it need to be in alignment, too, which is no small request given the mighty imbalances—personal and social—manifesting in the other domes. But the crown dome has its own independent challenges as well, particularly in a culture that rewards those of us who live in our heads (who do well academically in school, who are quantitative, etc.).<sup>39</sup> As an academic, by the time I was in my late thirties I had ransomed off all of my body parts below my neck—my legs, my arms, my belly—in order to “succeed.” I felt numb, drained, and completely cut off from my body’s pleasures and subtle sensations. I desperately wanted my body parts back, a reality that ended up dramatically changing the trajectory of my life. I started dancing and writing poetry, became a yoga teacher, learned better how to grieve and to honor emotion—all works-in-progress. Of course, academics are not alone in dealing with head-dominant training. This is why Matthew Sanford, a yoga teacher who does brilliant work with people who have been paralyzed, has said that even those who have use of their limbs often face many hours bent over, sacrum crunched, staring at a computer screen, forearms locked in a typing position.<sup>40</sup>

Perhaps that is another reason why it is fortuitous that the crown dome is facing upwards, so that the energy in the brain doesn’t just get funneled back into the body. It has a way out. Our culture’s overemphasis on the frontal lobes and thinking is one of the imbalances affecting people, a reality that exists not only in yoga communities.<sup>41</sup> However, one way yoga teachers contribute to this imbalance is the rapid-fire calling of cues and dialogue which leaves little space to actually feel the postures. This pace keeps us stuck in the part of the mind that lives in the brain. Cues that contribute to a tightening and locking of the neck muscles also keep the energy stuck in our heads, which blocks off the crown dome’s ability to both release energy and receive new awareness.<sup>42</sup>

But even the terms “receive” and “release” are inadequate, since they imply that the crown dome has only two directions though there is nothing linear about the crown dome at the energetic level. We need a verb for “kaleidoscope” to begin to visualize the exchange of energy possible at the top of the head.

The balanced crown dome is the realm where the magical, mysterious, irrational, imaginative, and transformative can be experienced.

It is where storytelling and creativity expand. But magic is put on hold in yoga communities where women are still mistreated (evidenced in male sexual harassment and boundary violations); where children are still cordoned off (to their own kid classes, even when mothers and fathers of young children could benefit from bringing their children along with them); where white people are writing articles asking where all the people of color are, without awareness that people of color are busy teaching and taking classes in an amazing array of settings; where gender binary language precludes transgender visibility.

Magic is blocked when cues keep us switching between up dog and down dog, between warrior one and warrior two so fast that we don't have time to even notice that the crown dome is blocked. The soft spot at the top of our heads and the part of the foot called the "Achilles' heel" have long been considered places of weakness in our bodies. What about if that weakness is actually our strength? What if muscle strength is overrated, and softness and space are more what we need? What might it look like for our frontal lobes to check in with all of the domes of the body before giving an answer to the next email or policy question or family fight? Yoga with this in mind requires making time, being less attached to efficiency, and more attached to being with our bodies, minds and one other genuinely.

One of my beloved photographs is of a late seventeenth or early eighteenth century divine monk in Thailand, Phra Sankachai, whose head is almost as wide as his hips.<sup>43</sup> The entire top of his head appears to be his crown dome, and if he were to do a headstand, he wouldn't even need his hands, since the top of his head could serve as another perineum—opening like a flower to the earth. What would it be like if our crown dome were this expansive? What would it be like if the magic, uncanny knowledge, insight, and wisdom that can come from above and around us could be in direct communication with the other domes of the body?

## Conclusion

*When sky becomes stars  
the earth reaches toward expanse  
my heart knows yours*

While there has been much attention to the chakra system in the body—and for good reason—little attention has been given to the



energy of the domes, which are related to alignment at the physical, spiritual, cultural, and even political level. Experiencing this alignment requires us to think about power imbalances, about reparations, about slowing down and making amends. It requires cues and dialogue that move past muscles and into the subtle body. It requires rethinking the trappings of professionalism and inviting in democracy.

These possibilities are why it is an exciting time in yoga. In the last two decades, neuroscience is helping to show in scientific terms what yogis and meditators have long known—that the brain and the mind are much more malleable, much more flexible, much better able to repair themselves than previously thought. This is my hope for our yoga communities as well as for our larger society: that we will be flexible enough to find alignment that we have not yet thought possible. While it appears that there are as many definitions of yoga nowadays as there are practitioners, I find myself coming back to one offered by yogi Anthony Bogart: “Yoga is aligning with the changing nature of grace.”<sup>44</sup> This has much to do with the domes in our bodies, and the places inside and outside of the body we come to call home.

In many ways, we are in a unique moment in yoga history; struggles about ownership, embodiment, and collective social change are in flux. The historical moment is a little bit like the early period in the Internet’s history, when ideas were popping with innovation before Google became the monopolizing search engine. This time in yoga history is akin to the early period in Hip Hop music, with its roots in city streets, in urban areas, before it was corporatized with increasing focus on gangster rap and misogynous lyrics. In this way, this is an energizing time, but also one where we need to be keenly aware of the consequences of the decisions we make—from the dialogue used in classes about anatomy, to where yoga is practiced, to how it is represented in the media, to how we tell the story of yoga’s evolution.

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## Appendix I: Resonance between Native American Code of Ethics and Yoga Sutras

**Note:** The Yoga Sutras are 196 aphorisms (threads, poetic lines, observances) that were first codified in the 3rd century BCE by Patañjali but probably reflect communal knowledge.<sup>45</sup> The Code of Ethics come from *The Red Road to Wellbriety: In the Native Way*.<sup>46</sup> These ethics were written by Don Coyhis but also reflect communal knowledge. Like the Native American Code of Ethics, *The Yoga Sutras* are listed individually but are deeply interconnected (i.e. not to be dissected). The words in both wise guides are crystalline, distilled, and poetic.

There are also key differences in the tone and emphasis of the Yoga Sutras and the Native American Code of Ethics. For this article, I am focusing on resonance to underscore the land-based foundation of yoga and yoga's Indigenous, Eastern, and African roots. But much can be learned by tracing key philosophical distinctions as well. As Chickasaw poet Linda Hogan writes, "Tribal people do not require a sameness of thought or belief. We come from different stories, different origins, and we respect the differences."<sup>47</sup>

Native Code One: Rise with the sun to pray. Pray alone. Pray often. The Great Spirit will listen, if only you speak.

Sutra One: "And now the teaching on yoga begins."<sup>48</sup>

Sutra Two: "Yoga is the settling of the mind into silence."<sup>49</sup>

Sutra Three: "When the mind has settled we are established in our essential nature, which is unbounded consciousness."<sup>50</sup>

Sutra Fourteen: "The practice of yoga will be firmly rooted when it is maintained consistently and with dedication over a long period."<sup>51</sup>

Native Code Two: Be tolerant of those who are lost on their path. Ignorance, conceit, anger, jealousy and greed stem from a lost soul. Pray that they find guidance.

Sutra Thirty-three: "The mind becomes clear and serene when the qualities of the heart are cultivated.

friendliness toward the joyful

compassion toward the suffering

happiness toward the pure  
impartiality toward the impure”<sup>52</sup>

Native Code Three: Search for yourself, by yourself. Do not allow others to make your path for you. It is your road and yours alone. Others may walk with you, but no one can walk it for you.

Fourth Niyama: *Svadyaya*—self knowledge, self study, reflection.<sup>53</sup>

Native Code Five: Do not take what is not yours whether from a person, a community, the wilderness or from a culture. It was not earned or given. It is not yours.

Third Yama: *Asteya*—“not stealing, in the wide sense of not laying claim to anything that is not really yours. There are many levels of misappropriation, but all are an expression of a feeling of lack. We ‘steal’ as long as we identify with the limited self, the ego, and are ignorant of our real nature, which is a fullness of Being that needs no addition.”<sup>54</sup>

Native Code Eight: Never speak of others in a bad way. The negative energy you put out into the universe will multiply when it returns to you.

This sounds like karma, a basic tenet of Buddhism and yoga philosophy.

Native Code Ten: Bad thoughts cause illness of the mind, body, and spirit. Practice optimism.

Sutra Thirty-four: “Negative feelings restrict us, the opposite should be cultivated.”<sup>55</sup>

Native Code Fourteen: Be truthful at all times. Honesty is the test of one’s will within this universe.

Second Yama: *Satya*—“impeccability in thought, speech and action.”<sup>56</sup>

Native Code Fifteen: Keep yourself balanced. Your Mental Self, Spiritual Self, Emotional Self, and Physical Self all need to be strong, pure and healthy. Work out the body to strengthen the

mind. Grow rich in spirit to cure emotional ills.

First Niyama: *Shaucha*—cultivate “a mind which is clear, uncluttered and straight forward.”<sup>57</sup>

Sutra Forty-six: “The physical postures should be steady and comfortable.”<sup>58</sup>

Sutra Forty-seven: “They are mastered when all effort is relaxed and the mind is absorbed in the Infinite.”<sup>59</sup>

Sutra Forty-eight: Then we are no longer upset by the play of opposites.”<sup>60</sup>

## NOTES

1. This article was inspired by the teachings of Angela Farmer and Victor van Kooten. For more on their life’s work teaching yoga, see [www.angela-victor.com](http://www.angela-victor.com). Thank you to Diane Harriford, Susan Kosoff, Crystal Rizzo, two anonymous reviewers, and Gabe Dayley for your sage advice on this article. This article is dedicated to Sangsuree Nicole, poet, yogi, activist, lover, taken from us in an instant: “no words, you who/ raining, this time, can’t we/ replay this song, or maybe/ replay the crossing, barter/ back a highway of grief/ can’t we, you sing earth/ my spirit, but too soon/ this give and take, a baby/ you wanted in your belly/ I grieve most/ for your mother, Thai tie/ to the land of mango/ and chili fish, can’t you/ can’t we, beam back/ this life, too soon.”
2. I clarify “multiple” roots of yoga since there is no monolithic yoga history. For example, while a dominant narrative about yoga’s origins focuses on a story about its codification by the scholar sage Patañjali in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, we know so little about him that “he” may actually be a “she.” While a dominant narrative about modern yoga references Jois, Iyengar, and Desikachar as the most well known living yogis, feminist interpretation of contemporary history includes Krishna Kaur, Rama Jyoti Vernon, Angela Farmer, and Patricia Walden as well as many South Asian women’s mothers, sisters, grandmothers and other relatives. While the Yoga Sutras are often the primary text studied in Western teacher trainings, there are multiple foundational texts. A long history of colonialism and patriarchy eradicated many lineages, a reality South Asian feminist yogi scholars are bravely naming in their reclaiming of yoga as a “revolution from within.” See Punam Mehta, “Embodiment through Purusha and Prakrti: Feminist Yoga as a Revolution from Within,” and Roopa Kaushik-Brown, “Toward Yoga as Property,” in *Yoga, the Body and Embodied Social Change*, ed. Beth Berila, Melanie Klein, and Chelsea Jackson Roberts (New York: Lexington Books, 2016), 67-89, 227-241; Susanna Barkataki, “5 Liberating Ways to Practice Yoga without Giving into the Industry’s Neo-Colonialism,” retrieved from <http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/03/yoga-without-neo-colonialism/>.
3. Lauren Quan-Madrid and Leah Rose Gallegos, “People’s Yoga: A Movement Toward Accessible Yoga, Healing and Wellness on Los Angeles’ Eastside,” *Yoga and Access: Questions of Inclusion Conference*, University of California, Berkeley, April 25, 2014; Nikki Myers, founder, Y12SR, Yoga of 12-Step Recovery, [info@12sr.com](mailto:info@12sr.com); Grassroots, community-based yoga in Boston, <http://handstoheartcenter.org>.

4. Beth Berila, Melanie Klein, and Chelsea Jackson Roberts, eds. *Yoga, the Body and Embodied Social Change* (New York: Lexington Books, 2016); South Asian Perspectives on Yoga in America, <https://saapya.wordpress.com>.
5. Victor van Kooten, *Living Breath: From Inside Out* (Berkeley: Ganesha Press, 2006).
6. Patanjali, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, trans. Alistair Shearer (New York: Bell Tower, 1982), 110.
7. While all non-Native people are currently living on land that was stolen, settler colonialism in the United States has historically been spearheaded by white people. Black people could not own land and were considered property themselves for 250 years. The land now known as the Southwest was Mexican until the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. For scholarship on the historical, political, economic, and philosophical import of the earth for Indigenous people and the impact of land theft and displacement, see: Moore, Kurt Peters, Ted Jojola, and Amber Lacy, eds. *How It Is: The Native American Philosophy of V. F. Cordova* (Tucson: University of Arizona, 2007); M. Annette Jaimes, *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization and Resistance* (Boston: South End Press, 1992); Qwo-Li Driskell, Chris Finley, Brian Joseph Gilley, and Scott Morgensen, eds., *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics and Literature* (Tucson: University of Arizona, 2011); Andrea Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* (Boston: South End Press, 2005); Michael Yellow Bird. "Healing through Neurodecolonialization and Mindfulness," Talk at Portland State University. Accessed on Vimeo October 11, 2016, <http://vimeo.com/86995336>.
8. Personal conversation with Diane Harriford and shared with author. Vassar College, 2012.
9. Jim Vander Wall, "A Warrior Caged: The Continuous Struggle of Leonard Peltier" in *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization and Resistance*, ed. M. Annette Jaimes (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 291-310.
10. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978).
11. Mark Singleton, *The Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practices* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
12. Jan Willis, "Dharma Diversity: The Many Faces of Buddhism in America," Buddhist Leadership Conference, Naropa University, Boulder, Colorado, 2009.
13. See Stephen Cope, *Yoga and the Quest for the True Self* (New York: Bantam, 1999), 316-318.
14. Paula Gunn Allen, *Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon, 1986); Beth Brant, ed., *A Gathering of Spirit: Writings and Art by North American Indian Women* (Rockland, ME: Sinister Wisdom Books, 1984); Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983).
15. Lewis Mehi-Madrona, "Native American Bodywork Practices," <http://www.kripalu.org/article/401>. For information about Mehi-Madrona's institute see <http://www.coyoteinstitute.us>. See also Marilou Awiakta, *Selu: Seeking the Corn-Mother's Wisdom* (Golden Colorado: Fulcrum Publishing, 1993); Stephen Cope, *Yoga and the Quest for the True Self* (New York: Bantam, 1999), for reference to Hopi mapping of energetic pathways, 204.
16. The Native American Code of Ethics, which is part of the Wellbriety Project created for Native people in recovery from trauma and addictions, offer a twenty-point set of principles for living in right relation to each other and to the earth. White Bison, *The Red Road to Wellbriety: In the Native American Way* (Colorado Springs: White Bison, 2002), 10-12.
17. Patanjali, *The Yoga Sutras*, 90, 92.
18. Angela Farmer, "Roots and Wings" CD, side one.

19. Angela Farmer, “The Base Chakra” CD.
20. When I first wrote this section, I included specific references to the sex organs but then edited it to use more generic terms out of concern that the reader might think the language too blatant or jarring. Even the term “perineum,” when first introduced in a yoga class can incite nervous laughter. But if we can’t even talk about the perineum, it is very hard to then learn how to ground ourselves through it. Discomfort with our bodies includes the use of cues and dialogue that render invisible how women’s breasts, yonnies, hips, booties, and ovaries may be useful in finding poses (or make such poses more difficult). Avoidant language also makes acknowledgement of male anatomy off limits. Can you imagine a teacher saying, “all the women with ample breasts, let your big girls help you with gravity in uttanasana” or, “when you do a back bend, you may feel the stretch and energy from the tip of your head all the way to your yonnie.” Or, “careful guys when you do eagle, to not squeeze your goods too hard.” A similar pattern of invisibility occurs around gender expression, race, class, and sexuality—it is what is unspoken that is often the hardest to identify and counter.
21. Patañjali, *The Yoga Sutras*, 90.
22. Hugh Milne, *The Heart of Listening: a Visionary Approach to Carniosacral Work, Volume 1* (Berkeley, North Atlantic Books, 1995), 110.
23. Cope, *Yoga and the Quest for the True Self*, 207.
24. In my own work with college students teaching courses on social justice, I have learned that talking about inequalities head on and from a place of providing statistical proof of injustices closes people down. Teaching from a place of tenderness and self-reflective contemplation enables much deeper work, past the psyche and cognitive learning and into the realm of realization and awareness. Becky Thompson, *Teaching with Tenderness: Toward an Embodied Practice* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 47-48.
25. Rev. angel Kyodo williams, Lama Rod Owens, with Jasmine Syedullah, *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love and Liberation* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2016), xxviii.
26. *Ibid*, 23.
27. *Ibid*, 16.
28. *Ibid*, 21.
29. Patañjali, *The Yoga Sutras*, 111-112.
30. Thank you to Gabe Dayley for his enlightenment on this point.
31. Hugh Milne, *The Heart of Listening: A Visionary Approach to Craniosacral Work, Volume 2* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1995), 170.
32. Mary Rose O’Reilly, *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice* (New Hampshire: Boyton/Cook, 1998), 25.
33. Becky Thompson, *A Hunger So Wide and So Deep: A Multiracial View of Women’s Eating Problems* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 1-2.
34. Milne, *The Heart of Listening*, 177.
35. This excerpt is from an endorsement that Angela Farmer wrote for *Survivors on the Yoga Mat* (North Atlantic Books, 2014), January 2014.
36. Cathy Caruth, ed. *Trauma: Exploration in Memory* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995); Akasha Gloria Hull, *Soul Talk: The New Spirituality of African American Women* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2001) 141-181.
37. M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 287-332; Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Viking, 2014).

38. Joy Harjo, *A Map to the Next World* (New York: Norton, 2000), 17.
39. On the other hand, there are also over-the-top financial rewards for star athletes, who are treated as all bodies. In both academia and athletics, imbalance is rewarded.
40. Matthew Sanford, *Waking: A Memoir of Transcendence* (Emmaus, PA: Rodale, 2006). See also an interview with Iain McNay, in Britain: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A2Wx-2NXQAFY>; and <http://vimeo.com/330002>, accessed on October 5, 2016.
41. Over-reliance on the frontal lobe often involves censoring, managing emotions, and keeping things under control. As is true with the palate dome as well, the denial of candor and authenticity causes great imbalance.
42. This may be part of what is happening in the aging process when people are not encouraged to, or allowed to, move (which keeps the energy flowing among the domes). Without this energy release, ideas and memory can become stagnant and stuck. While people may have long-term memory, which has already been processed, short-term memory loss may relate to this blockage in the sky dome.
43. Denise Patry Leidy, *The Art of Buddhism* (Boston: Shambhala, 2008), 274.
44. Anthony Bogart, personal communication, June 16, 2014.
45. See Patañjali, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, trans. Alistair Shearer (New York: Bell Tower, 1982), cited previously. *The Yoga Sutras* is divided into four sections (the settled mind, treading the path, expansion, and self-realization.) All of the sutras listed are from section one of *The Yoga Sutras* with the exception of 34, 46, 47, and 48, which are from the second section.
46. Don Coyhis, *The Red Road to Wellbriety: In the Native Way* (Colorado Springs: White Bison, Inc., 2002). Each numbered ethical code can be found in Appendix 2 of Coyhis' book. Ethics 1-5 are listed on p. A-10; ethics 6-12 are listed on p. A-11; and ethics 13-20 are listed on p. A-12.
47. See Linda Hogan, "Foreword: Viola Cordova," in *How It Is: The Native American Philosophy of V.F. Cordova*, edited by Kathleen Dean Moore, Kurt Peters, Ted Jojola and Amber Lacy (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007), viii.
48. Patañjali, *The Yoga Sutras*, 90.
49. *Ibid.*, 90.
50. *Ibid.*, 90.
51. *Ibid.*, 96.
52. *Ibid.*, 95-96.
53. *Ibid.*, 64.
54. *Ibid.*, 60.
55. *Ibid.*, 96.
56. *Ibid.*, 60.
57. *Ibid.*, 62.
58. *Ibid.*, 110.
59. *Ibid.*, 111.
60. *Ibid.*, 111.