



ANATOMY & PHYSIOLOGY FROM A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE

The kinesthetic Buddha, human form and function—Part 2: The preparation for lotus

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Summary Buddhist statues may provide kinesthetic lessons relating the human body's actions and the spiritual life. This two-part paper presents a descriptive analysis of a statue of a meditating Buddha sitting in lotus pose. The statue, from the ancient Javanese monument, Borobudur, is correlated with Iyengar yoga and therapeutic soft-tissue manipulation. In addition, discussion is presented of the statue as a history of Hindu pranayama and Buddhist meditation practices. The three-dimensional modeling of the Buddha's torso is evaluated from the perspective of anatomy and the movement arts. A resulting somatic vocabulary presents Asian art without emphasizing textual discourse and analysis of esthetic motifs so that the art presents a kinesthetic lesson on the ideal connection between the human body's actions and the spiritual life. Central to this paper is the presumption that sculpture depicts the kinesthetics of breathing but must be carefully teased apart from historical anachronism.

A practical description is offered of a series of yogic poses, preparatory to adopting the lotus pose, based on the concepts elaborated on in part 1.

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Introduction

In the mid-1990s, during the nascent years of Cambodia's economic rebound from the brutal despotism of the Khmer Rouge, this writer learned from a news reporter how a successful Cambodian businesswoman had survived the terror. She would

only cry in the rain when she worked in the fields alone, away from the Khmer Rouge who would have executed her for grieving. They had already executed her husband. A kinesthetic appreciation of Buddhist art, to understand its transcendent qualities, bypasses the biography and physiology of grief. Although she cannot take center stage, the resilient nature of the Cambodian businesswoman transcends the violence in Buddhist history.³

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³Indian archeology concerns itself with a soapstone vase discovered in 1898 in Uttar Pradesh, India; this reliquary is

The first great Buddhist emperor Aśoka, who reigned over the Mauryan empire from 264 BC till 227 BC, spent the first decade of his reign actively engaged in military campaigns, including a fratricidal slaughter of contenders to the throne, till his empire spanned most of modern India today, Afghanistan, and the lower Himalayan region. Only then did Aśoka turn to peaceful means of conquest⁴ and began sending Buddhist missionaries to outlying kingdoms in South India and Burma (Hazra, 2002, pp. 6–7, 62–63, 67, 86, 103).

Mortality, pain and suffering, trauma and brutality, all functioned well in the early history of Buddhism. Hardly surprising that in Buddhism, human experience 'engenders suffering'; but soteriological solutions in Indian Hinduism and Buddhism are for absolute freedom instead of saving the person or the personality (Eliade, 1958, p. 35). Disentangling socio-political factors from the kinesthetic experience seems the appropriate parallel course. Resilience, the personal ability to survive turmoil, the capacity for displacement, becomes a matter of one's ability to decouple from personhood; this is an important consideration for analyzing the skillful physicality inherent to the lotus pose because physical pain is spoken of in the professional dance world and in Iyengar yoga classes as being the harmful kind indicating or promoting injury and the good teaching kind that re-aligns or strengthens. Both sorts of pain are equally concerned with personhood and self-achievement. In this paper, the personalized pain factor appropriately gives way to the equilibrium of forces, the cancellation of imbalances by vectors of motion. Though one may be inspired to achieve the lotus pose through a poetic or spiritual language of instruction, to understand why the lotus pose is stability requires the languages of speculative science and inquisitive engineering illuminating and supporting the personal kinesthetic lesson.

(footnote continued)

associated with a terrible massacre of the historical Buddha's clan. Dating back to the 3rd century BC of the ancient city of Piprahwa and bearing either the relics of the historical Buddha or his kinsmen; this vase is discussed in connection to the tradition of King Vidudabha slaughtering the men, women, and children of Śākyamuni Buddha's clan several years before the Buddha's death, a massacre recounted in two Buddhist tales, the Bhaddasāla Jātaka and the Avadānakalpalatā, and tersely mentioned in a chronicle of Buddhist lands written by the Chinese Buddhist monk, Fa-Hien, who journeyed to India and back home during the years 399–414 AD (Hazra, 2002, pp. 13, 26, 29, 179; Legge, 1965, p. 67). Śākyamuni Buddha means Buddha of the Śākya clan.

⁴Dharma-vijaya is the Sanskrit loosely translated as moral conquest and pertains to Aśoka's diplomatic tactics.

Iyengar yoga instructor Karin Stephan describes the lotus pose as a tourniquet (personal communication); truly it feels that way when the thighs are compressed by the feet's pressure high up the femoral shaft, and the groin lifts in response. This sensation is accomplished through distinctive Iyengar placement of the feet: ideally touching the groin in dorsi-flexion, everting, compressing with the lateral edges upon the thighs' mass. Such feet placement requires self-preparation, and Stephan herself acknowledges that a good lotus pose is impossible if the tops of the ankles and the lower lumbar are tight, though not too difficult 'if you create the right sequence of events' (personal communication) as in a logical set of physicalities, a chain of yoga poses, each of which are conditional to the lotus pose.

The preparatory sequence this writer received from Stephan is the following set of Iyengar yoga poses in Figs. 1–10 illustrations:⁵ (1) Thunderbolt, (2) Hero, (3) Head-knee, (4) Half Restrained Lotus (5) Seated Triangle, (6) Restrained Triangle, (7) Extended Side Angle, (8) Downward Face Dog, (9) Thunderbolt, and (10) Lotus. This sequence, diligently practiced, handsomely eases one into the

⁵The Sanskrit asana (pose) names are (1) Vajrāsana, (2) Vīrāsana, (3) Jānuśīrāsana, (4) Ardhabaddhapadmapaschimot-tānāsana, (5) Ūpavistakonāsana, (6) Baddhakonāsana, (7) Utthitapārsvakonāsana, (8) Adhomukhaśvānāsana, (9) Vajrāsana, and (10) Padmāsana (lotus pose). According to Stephan, the illustrations herein present a need to correct the footwork, particularly the woefully un-adducted, right foot in pose 7. The following corrections are translations from Stephanesque, Iyengar diction and present a kinesthetic of torque. Slight lateral hip rotation in pose 2 should center both knees and pronate both feet more. The right leg in 3 and 4 may be centered by stretching up/down the sole from the center of the instep and laterally/medially across the metatarsals while minimizing flexion of the toes. In 4, placing the foot higher up the femur, deeper into the groin, can reduce lateral rotation and center the right leg and adduct the left knee. Working toes and feet similar to the straight leg of 3 and 4 assists stretching both medial thighs in 5. To get both ilia truly facing forward in 7 and the right shoulder effortlessly moving backward (resting the left hand on a block helps), radically adduct the right forefoot (tucking a folded blanket under the lateral heel helps) to oppose that hip's lateral rotation, then minimize distension in that lateral shin through two lines of action—from the lateral malleolus to the 1st metatarsal, from the 5th toe to the lateral/anterior calcaneus; the relatively effortless left foot has no adduction; for assisting lateral rotation of both femurs and reducing lordosis, activate both gluteus maximus muscles and move the right ischium medially down until it is level with the back of the left knee. The lower foot in the pièce de résistance, the lotus pose, needs to be higher up the femur and deeper into the groin for greater stability. At Chez Stephan, feet nudge the body over the threshold between kinetic and spiritual energies.

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