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Source: *Philosophy East and West*, Jan., 2001, Vol. 51, No. 1 (Jan., 2001), pp. 73-82

Published by: University of Hawai'i Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1400036>

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INSPIRATION AND EXPIRATION: YOGA PRACTICE THROUGH MERLEAU-PONTY'S PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE BODY

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Introduction

This essay offers an interpretation of the yoga practice of *prāṇāyāma* (breath control) that is influenced by the existential phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. My approach to yoga will be less concerned with a comparison between Merleau-Ponty's thought and the texts of classical yoga than with the elucidation of the actual experience of breath control through the constructs provided by Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the lived body. The academic discussion of yoga can answer certain pedagogical goals, but it can never finally be severed from *doing* yoga. Academic discourse that is centered entirely on the theoretical concepts of yoga philosophies must to some extent remain incomplete. Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras* is itself a manual of practice. It is for this reason that I have chosen to take as the basis of my study the commentary of the scholar-practitioner T.K.V. Desikachar, rather than a more exclusively theoretical commentary. In so doing, I have approached yoga as an experience or phenomenon, and not only in the context of a series of academic debates.

While comparisons have been made between yoga and phenomenology, these studies have taken a different direction from the present study. Earlier comparative studies have been concerned with the thought of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical predecessor, Edmund Husserl, and the consonance between the transcendental aspects of his earlier thought and that of the more idealist schools of classical yoga.¹ While I will not contest the validity of these comparisons, I wish to offer another perspective on the yoga-phenomenology comparison that is less idealistic or transcendental and more existential or concrete in orientation. Thus, I shall distinguish existential from transcendental phenomenology and then proceed to show how this other version of phenomenology can make a fruitful contribution toward providing a framework from within the Western philosophical tradition for understanding the practice of yoga, just as transcendental phenomenology has already provided a means for establishing a common conceptual ground.

Summary of Conceptual Concurrences between Classical Yoga Concepts and Transcendental Phenomenology

Phenomenology in general seeks to comprehend the perceived or lived world prior to metaphysical categorizations. This is made possible by a method of radical re-

flection that is widely known as the “phenomenological reduction” or *epochē*, perhaps best explained as an absolute suspension of belief, doubt, or any kind of presupposition about the existence of the world and its objects. Earlier comparative studies of yoga and phenomenology have rightly stressed this particular aspect of phenomenology, first set out in Husserl’s early transcendental approach, as convergent with yogic meditative practices. Certain aspects of the yoga literature show a consonance with the *epochē* of transcendental phenomenology; this is especially evident in Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtras* where the Sanskrit term *nirodaha* can be shown to approach closely Husserl’s *epochē*. Patañjali’s classic summary of yoga, “*chitta vritti nirodaha*,” roughly translates as “Yoga is the suspension (*nirodaha*) of the fluctuations (*vritti*) of thought (*chitta*).” Thus, *nirodaha* is a rigorous meditation technique the goal of which is a purified perception (*purusa*) untainted by mental conditioning or habits such as present passions, future desires, or past impressions (*karma*). *Nirodaha* is the route to attaining a pure consciousness (*samādhi*), which lies beyond the psychological mind (*chitta*) and envelopes the division between perceiver and perceived.² As pure, self-evident knowledge, *samādhi* can only be occupied by the practitioner but never described, for to do so would be to turn the experience into an object and hence distort its meaning.

In a remarkably similar manner, Husserl distinguishes the “hidden ‘I’” of transcendental subjectivity from the psychological ego that is still immersed within the subject-object bifurcation.³ Like Patañjali, he advocates a transformation of the mental structures that inhibit clear perception in order to develop a reflexive “witness consciousness” toward our own process of perceiving the world. Built into both theories is the ideal of a pure consciousness that remains as a residue of this methodological cleansing process: an a priori or pure subjectivity distinct from an external objective world.

Existential Phenomenology: The Critique of Pure Subjectivity

“Existential” phenomenology appeared through Heidegger’s critique of the metaphysical dualism implicit in the idea of a “pure subjectivity” cast in binary opposition to a “pure materiality.”⁴ Rejecting the convention in Western thought to think in terms of binary antonyms, Heidegger asserted that there can be no subjectivity apart from the world, or, to put it another way: it is the *relation* between subject and world that is prior to their categorical division. Individual human beings are immersed within and arise out of existence generally. Heidegger’s concept of *dasein* (literally “there-being”), typically translated as “being-in-the-world,” is that of a historically situated existence that is aware of itself as existing in a finite temporal horizon, that is, toward death. As a development away from Husserl’s earlier phenomenology of transcendental subjectivity, Heidegger’s *dasein* is always already “in and of” the world. Hence, in existential phenomenology, human existence is adhered to the world, neither an internality nor an externality, neither subject nor object, but a spatiotemporal openness. Merleau-Ponty’s contribution was to tighten the concept of *dasein* through an existential-phenomenological rehabilitation of the human body.⁵

Merleau-Ponty's Conception of the Lived Body

Building on Heidegger's revision of subjectivity as a self-world *relation* rather than a consciousness *apart* from the world, Merleau-Ponty focused on the "zero point" of this relation: the lived body *is* this relation, which he shows to be the pre-categorical ground sought by Husserl and Heidegger, that crosses subjectivity and objectivity. Merleau-Ponty highlights human sensory experience as emblematic of metaphysical antonyms such as subject and object or interiority and exteriority. His term *sens* connotes both "sense experience" and "meaning." The lived body, in contrast to the medical or physical body, grounds personal life as well as the impersonal or objective dimension of nature of which it is a participant. "Now we must think of the human body ... as that which perceives nature which it also inhabits."⁶ The lived body is the embodied consciousness, a nexus between the twin roles of the active agent of perception and the passive object of perception by others. The nexus may not be separated into subject and object or self and world, but is an irreducible foundation.

Although we will remain with the term "lived body" for the purposes of this essay, it should be mentioned here that in his final work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty adopts the term "flesh" to express the continuity between the surface and depth of the world and that of the body. The "lived body" of the earlier writings is recast as "flesh" in the later work, to capture its primordial or elemental character. Flesh contains the ambiguous interplay between subject and object, internal and external. Merleau-Ponty's new phrase "flesh-of-the-world" deliberately replaces Heidegger's "being-in-the-world," where the philosophical term "being" is not only laden with centuries of tradition but is itself an abstract and overly intellectualized term. "Flesh," on the other hand, better serves Merleau-Ponty's goal of bringing philosophy "down to earth";⁷ it captures the intimate, personal, embodied character of human life. To Merleau-Ponty, flesh is a way of describing not only the body, but the basic substance of the world. Rather than describing the body in terms of inanimate material elements, he turns convention around to view the external world in terms of the body's elemental corporeality.⁸ Where "body" could suggest a complex system, "flesh" (*chair*) better expresses an elemental, raw dimension that is a crossing point between subject and object, body and world.

The Lived Body and Yoga

A concept of the lived body, which refuses subject-object distinctions, is especially relevant for the experience of yoga. Yoga not only affirms the existence of the external world, but employs the perceptual relation between the self and the world as the means of meditation practice. Control of the body is equated with the mastery of external nature, and this control is achieved through focusing the senses. The focus on sense experience grants primacy to the body. The body is understood as a microcosm of the external universe, or, in Eliade's terms, the goal of yoga is to achieve a cosmic "homology" between the body and the world.⁹ Breath control is

the emblem or master metaphor of this goal.¹⁰ The central place of the body in the theory and practice of yoga suggests a comparison with Merleau-Ponty's thesis of the primacy of the body and could serve as a point of mutual clarification.

Our habitual tendency, in our awareness of our bodies, is to separate the "outer" body in contact with the external world from the "inner" body—that which we carry around inside ourselves. Such a separation tends to an alienation that we habitually experience in relation to our bodies. The objects of external sense become the focus of our experience, so that we tend to privilege that aspect of our body that is accessible to the external-observer perspective. We think of ourselves in terms of our mirror images, that is, as images observable from an external point of view. Correspondingly, our perception is alienated from the sentient mass of our bodies, which is relegated to the margins of our ordinary experience. *Prāṇāyāma*, or breath control, integral to the practice of yoga, prevails against this alienation: it is the concrete experience of the body as a *relation* between inside and outside. To breathe is to pull external air into ourselves and rhythmically to release outward something of ourselves. This simple experience, so common to us all, is brought into focus by yoga practice.

Proprioception is inverted perception, the perception of the deep tissues of the body, of enclosed or encircled corporeal space. When we fall ill or experience extraordinary body sensations, perception becomes directed to the source of discomfort. Ill health makes us acutely aware of our potential for perceptual inversion—perception directed inward to the hollow of the body, rather than outward to the world. Unfortunately, in the case of illness, this is such an unpleasant experience that we tend to "depersonalize" our bodies, distance ourselves or "defend" ourselves from the trauma of pain. The yogic practice of *prāṇāyāma*, on the contrary, gives us proprioception outside the context of illness. Through the practice of postures (*asana*) together with *prāṇāyāma*, we develop an inverted sense of our muscles, tendons, heart valves, and lung cavities. We come to live the opening and closing of these corporeal zones as we do with external visible limbs. We experience the expansion of the chest in inhalation, the quickened tempo of the heart, and the blood's flow through the course of the arteries. We incorporate the autonomic nervous system into the realm of the voluntary. We note how the lungs change tide between breaths, and the movement of interior contraction as expiration moves outward only to pause between breaths before beginning the cycle again. In the context of *asana-prāṇāyāma* we focus only on breathing rhythms; we take up what is involuntary and appropriate it into what Husserl would call "the sphere of ownness."¹¹ In psychoanalytic language we "cathect," occupy, or inhabit, the corporeal space that is otherwise habitually relegated to the zone of external nature. I am made aware of the body, habitually experienced as an "outer body" in contact with the external world, as being also an "inner body," not just occupying physical space, but as inhabited, psychical space.

The experience of *prāṇāyāma* points us to a central aspect of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the lived body, that is, his explication of interiority and exteriority. Used conventionally, terms like "outside" and "inside" are inimical to Merleau-

Ponty's project of collapsing the subject-object distinctions, that is, to the view that the body and the world are a continuum: "where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh?"¹² "Outside" and "inside" seem to imply the exactly rigid demarcation between the thing and the surrounding world that Merleau-Ponty is arguing against. At the same time, the terms "inside" and "outside" become semantically necessary when we engage with the body's spatiality. Merleau-Ponty's descriptive language of spatiality, depth, or dimension surmounts this difficulty by framing interiority and exteriority in a way that is distinct from the Newtonian concept of abstract space, which is purged of subjectivity.

In traditional philosophy, space is used in relation to inorganic matter, and not, as Merleau-Ponty uses it, to understand the experientially *full* space of sentient flesh. Merleau-Ponty's focus on the human body as a mass of consciously *occupied* flesh recasts the meaning of space. Mass is the continuum of interior and exterior that defines human embodiment. The enclosed space of the body is, almost in yogic terms, a homology *with* and microcosm *of* the world. This is exemplified in the phenomenon of sight. The perceiving or sentient body brings objects into visibility as much as it is itself brought into visibility by the seeing power of other sentient beings. Thus, the active power of seeing is also interwoven with one's passive enclosure within the world of visible things. Yet, to see a visible world is also to maintain a distance. Seeing and being seen are not collapsed into one another.

It is that the thickness of the flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity. . . . It is for the same reason that I am at the heart of the visible and that I am far from it: because it has thickness and is thereby naturally destined to be seen as a body.¹³

Here, Merleau-Ponty uses the words "thickness" and "corporeity" as synonyms for body space. He continues: "The thickness of the body, far from rivalling that of the world, is on the contrary the sole means I have to go into the heart of the things, by making myself a world and making them flesh."¹⁴ The concept of "flesh" expresses, crucially, the idea of *difference within identity*. As much as the surface of my body differentiates me from the objects around me, this differentiation is what also permits an empathy with the surface of the objects. So it is with depth: my body's spatial configuration as an occupied, or inhabited closure is itself the means through which I apprehend the depth of the objects and entities around me as co-enclosures. Corporeity, then, is not matter in the Newtonian sense, but is closer to the traditional concept of "element"—earth, air, fire, and water, which combine quality with substance. The body, not seen as matter, but as an exemplar sensible, allows the "outside" to be drawn entirely within it: "In any case, once a body-world relationship is recognized, there is a ramification of my body and a ramification of my world and a correspondence between its inside and my outside, between my inside and its outside."¹⁵

Merleau-Ponty's explication of interiority and exteriority is immediately relevant to the practice of *prāṇāyāma*, through which we experience exactly this correspondence. Strikingly, his use of the metaphor of breathing to explain the self-world re-

lation applies precisely to the experience of *prāṇāyāma*. In his last published paper, "Eye and Mind," he writes, "We speak of 'inspiration' and the word should be taken literally. There really is an inspiration and an expiration of Being. . . ." ¹⁶

Yoga and Reversibility

To grasp fully the nature of corporeity as a relation of inside and outside, we must turn to Merleau-Ponty's appropriation of gestalt psychology's conception of the figure-ground dynamic. The gestalt psychologists posit that all perception is bound within certain perceptual laws, the most primary being that of field phenomena or the figure-ground. We focus on an object at the cost of losing our focus on its background. This background, however, never disappears. In fact, it sustains the form of the object. The background is present through *holding* the object or offering the *field* through which it may come into focus. Visibility is possible through its invisible field. The important point here is that the structure of figure and ground is itself a totality. Moreover, this totality can invert: we can switch, or reverse, the figure and ground back and forth at will. Reversibility is at the heart of the figure-ground relation and is fundamental to Merleau-Ponty's philosophical project; in particular, it is intrinsic to his understanding of the self-world relation. There is a "correspondence between" my body's inside and the outside of the world and, reversibly, between the interiority of the world and my body's exterior. "If one wants metaphors, it would be better to say that the body sensed and the body sentient are as the obverse and reverse. . . ." ¹⁷ Thus, there is a reversible relation between the body as it actively senses and the body as it is passively sensed by, the life around it; Merleau-Ponty takes from Husserl the term "interwoven" (*verflochten*) and "within one another" (*ineinander*) to preserve the distinction between sensing and being sensed while also maintaining the mutually constitutive relation between these active and passive aspects of the human body.

The notion of reversibility, of the active and passive aspects of the human body as co-constitutive, may be seen to underlie Desikachar's description of yoga practice. In his manual *The Heart of Yoga: Developing a Personal Practice*, Desikachar asks the practitioner to recall that "yoga is the practice of observing oneself without judgement," ¹⁸ and he goes on to define yoga informally as "something we experience inside, deep within our being. Yoga is not an external experience." ¹⁹ It is distinguished from other arts performed before an audience because "We do it only for ourselves. *We are both observer and what is observed at the same time.* If we do not pay attention to ourselves in our practice, then we cannot call it yoga" (emphasis mine). ²⁰ The state of yoga is described by Desikachar in terms not only of the observing "witness consciousness" but also of "what is observed." The identity of the practitioner is not extracted from the observable but is experienced as a totality that joins the observer and the observed.

In a working note to *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty writes, "The true philosophy" is to "apprehend what makes the leaving of oneself be a retiring into oneself, and vice versa. Grasp this chiasm, this reversal. That is the mind." ²¹

In much the same vein, Desikachar observes, commenting on *Yoga Sūtra* 1.12, “The state of yoga is achieved by simultaneously striving (*abhyasa*) and letting go (*vairagya*).”²² The yogic technique of *pratyāhāra*, translated by Desikachar as “to withdraw oneself from that which nourishes the senses,” lends itself to comparison to the figure-ground process central to Merleau-Ponty’s thesis. “While the term *pratyahara* is literally construed in terms of withdrawal, in practising *pratyahara*, we concentrate on one sense object (of any sense) to exclude external distractions or push them into the background.” Through *pratyahara* one develops an ability to perform, in gestalt terms, a figure-ground switch between general world and single object. In the figure-ground relation, deliberately adopted by the practitioner, any point of focus will do (such as an image or sound) but breath is the most paradigmatic point of focus. In breath extension, I focus on breath to put the rest of the perceived world into the background. But in yoga I paradoxically withdraw my senses to achieve control over my sensory processes: I diminish my senses to strengthen them. My perception becomes heightened once I learn to withdraw perception. The classical yoga tradition calls this *ekagrata* or “one pointedness” to describe this yogic concentration. Once accomplished, concentration is held and sustained (*dharana*) by holding the point of focus, and a link or relation is developed between self and object; this is meditation proper (*dhyana*). The subject engages with the point of focus until he or she is joined with and assumes the position of the point of focus (*samādhi*).

Conclusion

At the beginning of this essay, I offered a brief summary of how the goal of yoga practice, pure consciousness or *samādhi*, may be approached theoretically through Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology. Specifically, I mentioned the theoretical convergence between the concept of *samādhi* and Husserl’s concept of transcendental subjectivity. But when considering the concrete yoga practices required for the attainment of *samādhi*, the key practice, *prāṇāyāma*, foregrounds the body in a manner not sufficiently acknowledged in Husserl’s transcendentalism, which has hitherto been the sole basis for the comparison of yoga and phenomenology. In this context, without rejecting Husserl, we might productively turn to Merleau-Ponty’s development of Husserl’s later amendments of his own transcendentalism. Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology, with its key concept of the lived body, manifests a concurrence with yoga practice that takes greater account of the central role of the body in that practice. His explication of interiority and exteriority and his thesis of reversibility resonate with the phenomenological descriptions of yoga as exemplified in the writings of the scholar-practitioner, T.K.V. Desikachar. The significance or value of the comparison between Merleau-Ponty’s thought and yoga is not that it attempts to impose a Western philosophical framework for an established non-Western tradition: such an attempt would do less than justice to the integrity of the yoga tradition. Rather, I hope to establish, even through this brief study, that yoga is an important resource for phenomenologists undertaking future research in the

ongoing project prescribed by Merleau-Ponty: namely to bring Western thought “down to earth” by focusing on the lived human body as philosophical and psychological ground.

Notes

I wish to thank the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore, India, for the research fellowship that enabled me to begin this essay. Thanks are particularly due to Dr. Sundar Sarukkai for many prolonged and enjoyable academic discussions.

A version of this paper was published in the newsletter of *The Transpersonal Psychology Review*. This was without the author’s knowledge or permission and after the author had granted copyright to University of Hawai’i Press for publication in *Philosophy East and West*.

- 1 – See A. Paranjpe and K. Hanson, “On Dealing with the Stream of Consciousness: A Comparison of Husserl and Yoga,” in *Asian Contributions to Psychology*, ed. Anand C. Paranjpe, David Y. F. Ho, and Robert W. Rieber (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1988), pp. 215–231; R. Puligandla, “Phenomenological Reduction and Yogic Meditation,” *Philosophy East and West* 20 (1) (January 1970): 19–33; and Ramakant Sinari, “The Method of Phenomenological Reduction and Yoga,” *Philosophy East and West* 15 (3–4) (July–October 1965): 217–228. All of the above focus exclusively on the early writings of Husserl as the point of comparison between phenomenology and Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtras*.
- 2 – See Ian Whicher, “Nirodaha, Yoga Praxis and the Transformation of the Mind,” in *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 25 (1997): 1–67. Whicher provides a detailed etymological and philosophical analysis of the term *nirodaha*. In brief, he claims the conventional translation of *nirodaha* as “stopping the mind” does not do justice to the subtlety of the term and to yoga philosophy and practice in general.
- 3 – Edmund Husserl, “Phenomenology,” in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1951), vol. 17, p. 701.
- 4 – In Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1962).
- 5 – In the less-known text of *Ideas II*, which was only published in German in 1951 and translated into English in 1989, we can see how Husserl himself began to focus on the lived body. He states that every object, real or imagined, is in some kind of spatiotemporal orientation to the perceiver’s body. Only through the body does the world become real: “all that is thingly real in the surrounding world of the ego has its relation to the body” (Edmund Husserl, *Ideas pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, 2d book, *Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz

and André Schuwer [Dordrecht and Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989], p. 61). He even goes so far as to say: “Furthermore, obviously connected with this is the distinction the body acquires as the bearer of the zero point of orientation, the bearer of the here and now, out of which the pure ego intuits space and the whole world of the senses. Thus each thing that appears has *eo ipso* an orienting relation to the body, and this refers not only to what actually appears but to each thing that is supposed to be able to appear” (ibid., p. 61). Thus for the later Husserl, even a fantasy exists in relation to the corporeal “zero point,” which is “the bearer of the here and now.” From this we can see how Husserl was moving in a direction, which was only extended by Merleau-Ponty, grounded on corporeal experience and *not* the transcendental ego that is the basis of the comparative studies cited above.

- 6 – Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Themes from the Lectures at the College de France: 1952–1960*, trans. John O’Neill (1968; Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 128. See also M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (1945; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962).
- 7 – Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics*, ed. with an introd. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 13.
- 8 – Merleau-Ponty’s reversal of convention here is akin to Kant’s reversal of empiricist convention in his famous premise, “suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge” (1781; Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. with an introd. Norman Kemp Smith [New York: Macmillan, 1929], p. 22).
- 9 – Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, trans. Willard R. Trask (1954; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 97. Eliade’s scholarly discussion of *hatha* yoga and tantrism is especially helpful (pp. 200–273).
- 10 – *Yoga Sūtra* 2.49–55. The standard academic translation is by James Haughton Woods, *The Yoga-system of Patañjali: Or, The Ancient Hindu Doctrine of Concentration of Mind, Embracing the Mnemonic Rules, Called Yoga-sutras, of Patañjali . . .*, Harvard Oriental Series, vol. 17 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914; Varanasi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1966). A more recent translation in a popular style is by Barbara Stoler Miller, *Yoga: Discipline of Freedom: The Yoga Sutra Attributed to Patanjali: A Translation of the Text, with Commentary, Introduction, and Glossary of Keywords* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). The translation I have preferred, with a commentary directed toward practice and rooted in a living yoga tradition, is *Patañjali’s Yogasutras: An Introduction*, trans. and comment. T.K.V. Desikachar (Madras: Affiliated East-West Press in association with Rupa and Co., 1987).
- 11 – Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. Dorian Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977), pp. 92–99.

- 12 – M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible: Followed by Working Notes*, ed. Claude Lefort and trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 138. Also see M. Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'Invisible: Suivi de Notes de Travail*, ed. Claude Lefort (Paris: Gallimard, 1964).
- 13 – Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 135.
- 14 – Ibid.
- 15 – Ibid., p. 136 n.
- 16 – Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy of Perception*, p. 167.
- 17 – Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 138.
- 18 – T.K.V. Desikachar, *The Heart of Yoga: Developing a Personal Practice* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions International, 1995), p. 23.
- 19 – Ibid.
- 20 – Ibid.
- 21 – Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 199.
- 22 – Desikachar, *The Heart of Yoga*, p. 113 n.