

May-2007

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Recommended Citation

Shroff, F. M. (2007). The Joyous *Yoni*: An Exploration of Yogic Perspectives Toward Sexual Empowerment for Women. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 8(4), 182-194.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol8/iss4/12>

The Joyous *Yoni*¹: An Exploration of Yogic Perspectives Toward Sexual Empowerment for Women

By FM Shroff²

Abstract³

This paper explores yogic approaches to women's sexuality. Acknowledging that sexualized violence against women is a harsh and pernicious reality for women all over the world, the paper adopts an inclusive perspective on women's sexuality that focuses on pleasure. A basic introduction to yoga prefaces a discussion of prana (life force) and concepts of unity and oneness. These concepts provide a framework for yogic concepts of the body, with an emphasis on sexuality. Specific breathing exercises, meditations, poses, locks and seals are mentioned. The experience of one of Canada's most accomplished yoga teachers is also depicted. The paper concludes by affirming that women's positive experiences of sexuality may be heightened through yogic practices that assist in living in the body more fully. Given the vacuum of scholarly work in this area, this paper is a small step toward understanding the common ground between the vast subjects of yoga and women's sexual empowerment.

Keywords: yoga, women's sexual empowerment, oppressive social structures

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore yogic approaches to women's sexuality. My interest in this topic arises from two lifetime passions: women's emancipation, including sexual emancipation, and the study of hatha yoga. In this paper I embrace a yogic theoretical perspective gleaned from my study of yogic texts, practical studies in India, Canada and elsewhere from excellent teachers and consistent practice of this mind/body discipline since I was four years of age. This is coupled with an anti-racism feminist training in sociology.

Within yogic philosophy, sexuality is a normal and healthy part of life. The second *chakra*, *Svadhithana*, is located between the navel and the pubic bone. Its color is orange and its issues are sexuality, creativity, relationships and emotions. Within the larger context of yogic approaches to life, the body and sexuality, the *Svadhithana chakra* will be examined.

¹ The word *yonī* is derived from the root YU: to unify, to tie. This term offers a broad spectrum of interpretations: primordial cause, the source of the changing world, home, sacred place, vulva and so forth. The *yonī* is graphically represented as a triangle pointing downwards, towards the vagina, a symbol of the mystery of creation. Tantric texts prescribe the adoration of the *yonī* in various ways because it can offer access to subtle creative, and universal energies. Quite often the *yonī* is adored with the *lingham* (phallus).

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³ I would like to thank yoga teachers Gioia Irwin and Maalaa for their valuable and encouraging comments on an earlier draft of this paper. My research assistant, Rehana Nanjijuma, was also a great help. My partner Roozbeh Mehrabadi, as always, was supportive and caring during the process of writing this paper.

Massage therapists, naturopathic physicians and other health professionals who work with the body have told me that the most plagued part of the body, both male and female, is the area around the second *chakra*. Yoga has profound potential to heal these repressed and pained emotions and this paper shines a light on that possibility.

Theoretical perspective: critiquing oppressive social structures

Drawing from an anti-racism, integrated, feminist perspective, this paper is rooted in theory that seeks to bring empowering and liberating thought-forms from various parts of the world together. As a Parsi woman of South Asian descent, I feel that part of the political project of freeing ourselves is to collectively decolonize the mind and body. Valuing aspects of our heritage and its worldviews is one step towards eradicating the shame and self-hatred that often manifest as by-products of colonialism (Fanon, 1967). Women's bodies have been bought and sold in the human marketplace, on screen and in the flesh. Sexualized violence against women--rape, torture, assault--occurs every minute on the planet. A grave assault on human rights around the world, violence affects about 1 in 3 women (Pan American Health Organization 2003). Violence against women is as serious a cause of death and incapacity among women of reproductive age as cancer, and a greater cause of ill health than traffic accidents and malaria combined (The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women 2004). Virtually every society in the world effectively condones violence against women. The WHO Multi-country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence against Women (2005) found that intimate partner violence and its association with women's physical, mental, sexual and reproductive health is widespread and prevalent. Prosecution and conviction of men who assault women or girls is rare in comparison to numbers of assaults. Only 44 countries have laws against domestic violence (Sharma and Gupta 2004). While great strides have been made on a national and global level with regards to the implementation and reform of women's legal rights, violence continues to be a means to maintain and reinforce male power over women.

Violence against women is exacerbated by women's subordinate position, poverty and other forms of misogyny (Onyejekwe 2004). Canada's national survey on violence against women reported that 30% of battered spouses had to cease regular activities due to the abuse; internationally, 50% of women had to take sick leave from work because of the harm sustain (WHO 2005)⁴. Violence against women has serious consequences for their physical and mental health. Women who have been abused are more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, psychosomatic symptoms, eating problems, and sexual dysfunctions (WHO, 2005). Violence may also affect the reproductive health of women through the increase of sexual risk-taking among adolescents, the transmission of STDs, including HIV/AIDS, unplanned pregnancies, and precipitate various gynaecological problems including chronic pelvic pain and painful intercourse. Consequences such as HIV/AIDS or unplanned pregnancies may in themselves act as risk factors for further aggression, forming a cycle of abuse (WHO 2005). Violence may also be fatal as a result of intentional homicide, severe injury or suicide.

⁴ For statistics on domestic violence in Canada, see Statistics Canada (2001). *Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile*. Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics. Available online at: <http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/85-224-XIE/0100085-224-XIE.pdf>

Because violence affects women on such multifaceted levels, solutions that work on all those levels will be the most powerful (Shroff 1995): various social, legislative, political and large scale changes that involve both men and women. This paper focuses on ways that women can feel more connected to their bodies/minds and sexualities.

Research shows that *pranayama* (breathing exercises that increase vitality) have a significant effect on self-efficacy for women who have been battered (Franzblau, Smith, Echevarri & Van Cantford, 2006).

Blossoming women's sexualities

A critical analysis of the ways in which women's bodies are exploited is a powerful step towards genuine sexual emancipation. Another step is to implement creative, bold ideas to replace those that currently dominate.

As stated earlier, the intent of this paper is to concentrate on the healthy, vital aspects of women's sexual pleasures. Women's pleasure is defined inclusively. This may incorporate pleasuring of the clitoris or the internal clitoral roots (often called the G spot⁵, renamed the Goddess spot by some women!), the vaginal canal, other parts of the vulva, other openings of the body such as mouth, ears, or any other parts of the body that are erotically charged. All parts of the body are potential erogenous areas. An exploration of pleasure from a woman-centred place is inclusive of masturbation, erotic play with others (male, female, transsexual and others) and other forms of sexual enjoyment. Lesbian love, intersex/transgendered love, bisexual love, heterosexual love, and other forms of love are included in this definition. The focus is on pleasure and not necessarily orgasm although orgasm is a celebratory part of sexual pleasure for many women. Outercourse and intercourse are also included in women's exultancy.

Women-centred pleasure, passion and joy are possible! Women's struggles necessitate a vision of the possible. Change is possible now, in the personal and social. Women are not (just) victims. It is possible to affirm what's right for each of us in self-defined diverse ways.

Many pathways exist to feeling better within our bodies. Counseling, talk, dance, movement, art, other therapies, being in nature, long walks, dream interpretation are some roads that women may take. These may be vehicles through which women may choose to express pain and come to some reconciliation about the body, sexuality and other issues such as disordered eating (Shroff 1993). Each woman chooses a path that makes sense for her; no rules exist. Here I have chosen to highlight yoga.

The practice of yoga assists aspirants in being fully present in the moment, within time and space. This grounded approach to life facilitates sexually empowering "YES! This feels great and I know this from deep within me". Yoga helps us to connect with our inner wisdom, so that a strong "NO!" also comes from that deep part of our inner knowingness.

⁵ The G spot is a group of glands, channels, blood vessels, and nerve endings around the urethra. Some women have discovered this point about 4-5 cm inside the vagina, on the upper anterior vaginal wall, right behind the pubic bone while others have found it more in the posterior vagina. If a clock image was superimposed on vagina with 12 in line with clitoris, the G-spot would be between 11 and 13.

Yoga: A brief introduction

Yoga comes from the Sanskrit verb *yug*, meaning to join or unite; yoga is about (re)uniting mind and body in the ultimate pursuit spiritual realization and peace. The great yogi Iyengar states that yoga is about "liberating the soul by bringing the consciousness, the mind and the body to a stage of integration" (Iyengar 1989:86). He notes that yoga's side benefits are health, happiness, peace and poise. Instruction from an experienced and well qualified teacher is vital yet ultimately the practitioner is the expert and yoga is about doing for ourselves--joining within .

Yoga helps us to be alive in our bodies, to enjoy sexual pleasure more and resist the unpleasant more clearly and strongly. Listening to the inner voice and feeling deeply *one* within ourselves is a central aspect of yoga. This inner connectedness has profound implications for sexual relations. Yogic (and related) principles include: mind, body and spirit are intricately connected; the human being is intricately connected to the natural world; plants which come from the earth are nourishing to the body and are highly potent medicines; the body is capable of healing itself in many circumstances

Four main branches of yoga exist: *jnana* (knowledge), *bhakti* (devotion), *karma* (work), and *raja* (action). All or any of these forms are thought to lead committed aspirants to self-actualization. In the non-Indian world, a form of raja yoga, called *hatha* yoga, is the most popularized type of yoga. One of hatha yoga's internationally acclaimed teachers, B.K.S. Iyengar, explains the purpose of hatha yoga (1989:3):

Ninety per cent of us are suffering in some way, physically, mentally or spiritually. The science of yoga helps us to keep the body as a temple so that it becomes as clean as the soul. The body is lazy, the mind is vibrant and the soul is luminous. Yogic practices develop the body to the level of the vibrant mind so that the body and the mind, having both become vibrant, are drawn towards the light of the soul.

Yoga is a holistic science that embraces physical, moral, social, mental and spiritual well being. Certain procedures are established within the eight 'limbs' of yoga (*ashtanga yoga*) (Shankar 1992:153):

1. *yama*=ethical discipline; freedom from greed
2. *niyama*=rules for personal conduct, including cleanliness and clarity
3. *asana*=postures
4. *pranayama*=yogic breathing techniques; the art and science of breath, which leads to the creation, distribution and maintenance of vital energy (Iyengar 1989)
5. *pratyahara*=withdrawal of the senses (Iyengar 1989)
6. *dharana*=concentration or complete attention
7. *dhyana*=meditation
8. *samadi*=full awareness; diffusing the soul into each and every part of the body(Iyengar 1989); a state of truth and bliss (Mehtha 1999); absorption in the infinite (sama=balanced, in harmony)

Yama and *niyama* are often neglected in most yoga classes outside of India despite their crucial contributions to the pursuit of this practice. *Asana* (postures) has become a

beginner's point of entry—one which newcomers and advanced practitioners are encouraged to continue for a lifetime.

Most branches of yoga are meditation of various forms. Hatha yoga, and its various offshoots such as Iyengar yoga, involves more body movements than other forms; it is the closest to exercise of all the forms of yoga. Most forms of yoga assist in maintaining vigor and rejuvenating the internal organs.

In hatha yoga, through observation of the natural world, especially animals and some plants, yogis devised thousands of different *asanas* (postures). When asanas are performed correctly (Iyengar 1989:56):

[T]he body cells, which have their own memories and intelligence, are kept healthy. When the health of the cells is maintained through the precise practice of *asanas*, the physiological body (*pranamayakosa*) becomes healthy and the mind is brought closer to the soul. This is the effect of the *asanas*. They should be performed in such a way as to lead the mind from attachment to the body towards the light of the soul so that the practitioner may dwell in the abode of the soul.

Many *asanas* are named for the animals who inspired them, such as the lion, cobra, cat, dog, camel, frog, crow and so on. Each asana is designed to produce a salutary effect on at least one part of the body. *Vipariti karani* (a variation of shoulder stand), for example, stimulates the thyroid gland, assists rapid circulation of blood so that toes to brain are supplied with nutrients. Additionally (Yesudian 1979:59): "[t]he large solar plexus or *surya nadi* lies at the root of the navel, while the site of the *chandra nadi* or moon centre is at the root of the palate. In the symbolic terminology of the yogi, *surya* or the sun is said to be eating the life-giving nectar and thus causing {hu}man's life to be shorter every day. When in the *vipariti karani* exercise the bodily posture is 'inverted', so that the moon centre is below and the sun centre above, new life flows into the system and rejuvenates the whole body."

Yogic philosophy categorizes experiences into 3--pleasurable, painful and delusive. These experiences are determined by past actions. Delusive experience is the result of clouded thinking and impulsive actions. Living in the world, according to this body of knowledge, is bound to be somewhat painful yet liberation is possible. Patanjali, the author of the classical and authoritative yoga treatise, describes and explains the enigma of human existence and directs practitioners to a way out by stopping the wheel of becoming (*bhavna-cakra* or *samsara*). This is related to many other Indian worldviews which purport that the ultimate freedom is not being reincarnated--not returning to the Earthly world.

Yoga's benefits have been well researched in India (Shankar 1992) and elsewhere. A plethora of scholarly articles exist on the benefits of yoga for most medical conditions, mental and physical. In summary, they show that regular practice of asanas has been proven to positively affect ill people. *Pranayama* (poorly translated to "breathing exercises" but more aptly a practice that encourages life force to flow within the mind/body) has assisted people with various disorders such as bronchial ailments. A recent study by Franzblau, Smith, Echevarria, and Van Cantford (2006) found that these breathing exercises have a profound impact on self-efficacy, a term that is used to describe a sense of having control over one's life. Their study focused on yoga for

sexually abused and battered women and among the most effective strategies to increase self-efficacy in these women was for them to learn *pranayama*.

Prana

Prana is the force that gives life to the human organism. It flows in pathways through the body, which are called *nadis* and are akin to energy meridians in traditional Chinese medicine. The seven *chakras*, meaning wheels or circles, are energy centers responsible for the regulation of *prana* in the body. The *chakras* are located along the median line of the body, from the crown of the head to the tailbone area. *Chakras* were ‘discovered’ independently by hundreds of rishis and yogins who were adept meditators; the knowledge of *chakras* thus comes from an embodied form of science, derived from intensive discipline. This inner knowledge has been verified by various other means such as kirlian photographs and various forms of energy medicine. *Chakra* healing is often performed for people with emotional, mental or physical distress. Knowledge of *chakras* therefore has many applications.

Table I Aspects of the Chakra System
(adapted from Swami Nitya Muktananda 1995)⁶

	<i>Muladhara chakra</i>	<i>Swadhisthana chakra</i>	<i>Manipura chakra</i>	<i>Anahata Chakra</i>	<i>Vishudha Chakra</i>	<i>Ajnya charka</i>	<i>Sahasradhara chakra</i> ⁷
Location	Bottom of the spine	Near the reproductive organs	Solar Plexus	Heart region	Neck	Between the eyes (forehead)	Crown of the head
Color	Yellow	Orange	Red	Smoky	Blue	No color	No color
Bhuta	Prthvi (earth)	Ap (water)	Agni (fire)	Vayu (air)	Akash (ether)	No bhuta	No bhuta
Mantra (prayer)	Lum	Rum	Yumya	Hum	Om	No mantra	No mantra
Function	Rootedness, worldliness	Security, Sensuality, Sexuality	Power, strength, digestion, sight	Compassion, caring, control	Controls rest of chakras, hearing, harmony in emotions	Austerity, intellect, spiritual world, imagination	One with the Absolute

Each *chakra* denotes form and function in the body; for example, the heart *chakra* is located near the region where the heart is located in the upper chest. In yoga and

⁶ This chart has been developed in conjunction with Swami Nitya Muktananda, an Indian yogi living in Toronto. Many aspects of the chart may differ from the perceptions of others.

⁷ This is not technically considered a *chakra* by some theorists (Svoboda 1995).

meditation practices, focusing on the heart *chakra* may assist someone who is experiencing physical, emotional or spiritual uncertainties which are connected to the heart *chakra*'s functions--compassion and caring.

The chart above denotes the second *chakra* as the home for sexuality. However, male sexuality is rooted, according to some theorists (eg Conn 2004), in the first chakra, *muladara*, meaning *root/source*. This may explain why sexuality is such a basic need for some men.

Yoga, unity and the body

According to yogic principles, the smallest particle of the universe is the universe in miniature. The interaction between the universe and the individual takes place through intake and output of matter. The universe is thus the macrocosm and other entities, including human beings, are the microcosm. This concept has profound implications. If human beings behaved as if all members of the universe were connected and the interests of all were the interests of one, then conflicts, wars, colonialism, patriarchy and other forms of oppression would be greatly reduced if not eliminated. The South African slogan, "an injury to one is an injury to all" would have genuine meaning in such an ideal world.

Within the yogic theoretical framework, the mind and body are one yet discussing them as separate parts of the whole is part of the explanatory framework of yoga. Within this framework, the mind is also divided into intellect (*buddi*), soul/inner self (*atma*) and that aspect of mind which co-operates with the senses in building perceptions, and which builds up images and concepts, intention and thought-construct (*manas*). All these parts work together. *Yogins* (accomplished practitioners of yoga) consider the body to be our true palace/temple, which we listen to profoundly and nurture on a daily basis.

In some yoga classes participants learn to touch their own hips, bellies and other body parts, with their hands and with inner concentration. Participants touch each other too. In backbends partner work, for instance, some teachers encourage partners to touch the groin area, making the teaching quite intense, but nevertheless insightful since major emphasis in the backbend pose is indeed on the groin area. Done sensitively with an adept teacher this only helps us to accept the normalcy of different body parts and takes our focus to learning *asana*.

Working through the Svadisthana Chakra

Chakra means wheel/circle. As mentioned above, *chakras* are energy centres of the body that regulate *prana* (life force, life energy). They are located at the intersection of the major *nadis* (energy channels): *ida* (the channel of lunar energy), *pingala* (the channel of solar energy) and *sushumna* (the central and major channel in the body, running parallel to the spine) (Iyengar 1989). All of these energetic concepts have been experienced by various *yogins* over thousands of years. It is because many of them experienced the same energetic wheels that these unified concepts have been formulated.

As the above chart shows, not only sexuality, but also emotions, feeling, desire, sensation, and movement are located in the second *chakra*. This *chakra* is related to the element water. When this *chakra* is awakened we experience fluidity and grace, depth of feeling, sexual fulfillment, and the ability to accept change.

Even though the *chakras* are integral to each other, different *chakras* might be blocked. Focusing on one *chakra* at a time, while being cognizant of the other 6 *chakras*, helps to release energy blockages, allowing for a flow of *prana* throughout the system. Sometimes the pathway to awakening the *swadisthana chakra* is by beginning with the *anahata chakra* which is the heart chakra, responsible for love, compassion, caring, giving, nurturing and related functions. By allowing the *anahata chakra* to bloom feelings of love may catalyse openness in other areas.

Yogic perspectives on sexuality include the notion that sex is a natural function and a beneficial part of a loving relationship. One of the four aims of life in Hindu cosmology is *kama* (pleasure). *Kama* is the pursuit of pleasure, binding to others, regulation and integration of passions. *Kama* is sensuous love and emotional feelings of attachment. The enjoyment of life's pleasures predisposes a fit body and mind. *Kama* is the Hindu God of Love, whose bow with flower-tipped arrows, sends "desire quivering to the heart" (Zimmer 1951:38). In ancient Indian thought *Kama* is recognized as the stimulus of action. This is the enjoyment of appropriate objects by the five senses of hearing, feeling, seeing, tasting and smelling, assisted by the mind together with the soul. The ingredient in this is a particular contact between the organ of sense and its object, and the consciousness of pleasure which arises from that contact is called *Kama*. As in other aspects of life, moderation in sexual activity is advised. Learning deep relaxation is a central part of yogic practice. Sexual relations that are rushed and strained often leave women (and their partners) unsatisfied. When partners in a sexual relationship learn to practice relaxation, harmonious sexual relationships become more possible.

Tantra and Kundalini—In brief

Two branches of yoga, Tantra and Kundalini, while broad in their scope, include specific foci on harnessing sexual power. In fact, the first known sexuality advice books were written by Tantric sages in India about 300 BCE (and by Taoists in the same time frame). In these books, women were respected, even worshipped, for their life-giving ability. Sexuality was connected to life giving and thus became the thread that connected birth to life, death and rebirth and was considered the holy rite between human and divine. Sexual activity was part of the path toward enlightenment. Anthropologists report that elaborate sexual rituals, involving visualization and breathing techniques specifically geared to the circulation of sexual energy throughout the whole body, occurred in temples in ancient times. People feasted, drank beer and wine, ingested hallucinogens and danced ecstatically while others chanted, sang and drummed. Incense, fire, provocative clothing and other accessories complimented these ancient sexual ceremonies. Within this setting, women's sexual pleasure was considered foremost, a central part of the sacred responsibility. While feeling sexual pleasure in this way, all participants experienced a state of altered consciousness which may have been one step in their path toward enlightenment (Chalker 2000).

Yoni means sacred place in Sanskrit. In Tantric yoga a woman's *yonis* is viewed as both erotic and magical; the *yonis* is considered a place of wisdom and healing. The *yonis* is considered the gateway through which sexual partners may experience oneness with the universe. It is a temple in which the divinity of a woman may be worshipped. In some systems, there is a *yonis chakra* that is solely concentrated on female pleasure.

Tantric teachings encourage couples to meditate together before engaging in sexual union. The meditation may involve concentrating on *mantras* (sounds) or *yantras* (visualizations). Once each person has reached a calm and peaceful state, they are ready to begin intimacy and their own creativity and spontaneity will guide their path to pleasure. They may choose to start by gazing at each other, then touching each other in a slow and conscious fashion. For instance they may touch hands, go back to back, touch noses, sitting on each other or other positions. The next step may entail breathing together (*pranayama*) or engaging in *asanas*. Being with each other in a respectful and loving manner is a vital part of the tantric tradition. Nothing is done in a hurried fashion. Rather, conscious, authentic and loving sexuality is fostered.

Coitus is considered a catalyst for meditation and spiritual realization. Coitus is one way to join opposites, helping each individual to become complete. Reaching orgasm this way allows for deep feelings of pleasure, relaxation and ultimately, spiritual transcendence. Feelings of interconnectedness with others and within oneself may be heightened through orgasm. Through Tantric sex, individuals transform their bodies into divine bodies, into gods and goddesses (Eliade 1958a). Practitioners of Tantric yoga have mastered some impressive physiological functions. There are a variety of *asanas* that condition and tone the sexual muscles and organs, improve circulation to the sexual organs, and improve suppleness and mobility of the spine and waist.

Tantric yoga goals are the same as those of other forms of yoga: spiritual union. Within Tantric Yogic tradition, engaging in meditation, breathing, postures, in concert with sexual activity, sex becomes a vehicle towards experiencing self-awareness and oneness. It is a way of making sex a sacred and conscious act nurturing authenticity and deep love; through this practice, people are called to honor themselves and others and move toward the experience of spiritual bliss.

Hatha Yoga

In searching for resources for this paper I found videos about better sex through yoga which were commercialized images of mainly blonde women doing yoga and dance-like movements to strengthen their sexual core muscles: the pelvis, pelvic floor muscles, hips and surrounding area. While these videos may be removed from yoga as defined earlier in this paper, toning the pelvic area muscles and making the joints more mobile through *asanas* would certainly be one approach to enhancing body awareness and would likely impact positively on the physical aspects of sexuality.

Examples of *asanas* that assist in awakening the second *chakra* include: seated forward bend (*Passimotasana*); dog (*Adho Mukha Svanasana*); camel (*Ustrasana*); tortoise (*kurmasana*); pigeon (*kapotasana*); monkey (*Hanumanasana*); corpse (*svasana*) **locust** (*Salabhasana*); bridge (*Setu bandhasana*); knee down twist (*Supta Matsyendrasana*); Goddess pose (*Supta Baddha Konasana*); Crocodile (*Makarasana*); Butterfly (*Baddha Konasana*); Open leg forward bend (*Upavistha Konasana*); Open leg child's pose (*Upavistha Virasana*); Frog (*Mandukasana*); Cat (*Vyaghrasana*); Sunbird (*Chakravakasana*); Cobra (*Bhujangasana*); Bow (*Dhanurasana*); Boat (*Navasana*); Yoga mudra with soles together (*Baddha Konasana II*) (<http://www.sacredcenters.com/chakras.html> 2004).

Additionally, it is possible to work on the second *chakra* through *asanas* that focus on moving fluidly, like water, feeling sensuous with movements, noticing sensation: pelvic breath with wave imagery; pelvic rocking, rapid pulses and so forth.

Many partner *asanas* exist, such as: join hands, bent with straight back; lean back to back and roll; side-by-side tree pose ; foot to foot yoga boat. These *asanas* may also assist in developing intimate contact with another person more comfortable.

Bandas for the Second Chakra

Mula banda, a seal of the anal sphincter/vagina, may also be used to focus on sexual energy and the second *chakra* region. Another *banda*: pelvic muscle pumps (women: kegels; men, flex the muscles while the penis is erect) (<http://www.sacredcenters.com/chakras.html> 2004). *Udiyana banda* (seal of the abdominal region) may also help to bring energy into the second *chakra* region.

Pranayama for the Second Chakra

Deep abdominal breathing, focusing on the energy around the second *chakra* is one *pranayama*. Other *pranayama* exercises include *nadi shodana* (alternate nostril breathing) and *baristrika* (the bellows breath). *So Hum* breathing (mentally repeating *So* on inhalation and *Hum* on exhalation) may be helpful for beginners while *navli* (churning of the abdominal cavity) and *agni sara* (breath of fire) may be helpful for intermediate aspirants.

Meditations on the Second Chakra—Svadhithana

Meditation (*dhyana*), means receptivity, passive awareness, in which there is the unity of the seer and the seen. It means understanding, the attitude of openness in which there is space for the inner truth to manifest itself. This inner truth that comes from all things in mediation is itself the mantra...All of nature is the creative meditation of the cosmic spirit. The basic silence and peace of nature is meditation. Lad, Vrasant and Frawley (1986:94-5)

In yoga, concentration (*dharana*) is related to sexual concentration, which is essential for harmony between couples. Reaching a “meditative attitude” allows connection to oneself in the present moment, stopping thoughts about other things and focusing on the joyousness of the moment. The act of lovemaking, approached as a mystical experience, without the involvement of external thoughts, is a form of yogic meditation.

Many meditations exist on the second *chakra*. Starting with a meditation to 'open'⁸ each *chakra* may be a good place to begin, allowing the energy of the *chakras* to flow through the *shushumna* channel and through the parallel *ida* (on the left side) and *pingala* (on the right side). Focusing on the second *chakra* and noticing what arises emotionally

⁸ Some authors, such as David Frawley (1999), note that only the truly realized aspirant can fully open the *chakras*. Since most householders do not reach this idealized state, many yoga teachers speak, perhaps idiomatically, about opening the *chakras* as the process of having directed energy in the *chakras*' location.

or mentally may be helpful, and writing it down, drawing it, singing, dancing or talking about these thoughts may deepen the learning process. Imagining the color orange in the area of the *chakra* or chanting *vam* may also be helpful. Visualizing the water element, fluid flow, six petals, with half moon--imagery of *Svadhithana*--may also assist in meditating on this *chakra*. Some may find it helpful to chant the vowel sound: Ooo (as in you) and/or work with this *mudra*: pressing the pads of the little fingers together. Another *mudra*: Placing hands in the lap, palms up, on top of each other. Left hand underneath, its palm touching the back of the fingers of the right hand. The tips of the thumbs touch gently. Concentrate on the second *chakra* at the sacral bone (on the lower back).

An affirmation that may assist in this process:

May I be at home and at ease in my body, and find balance in my relationships between myself (or my self) and others.

Applying these concepts in yoga classes

One of Canada's most accomplished teachers, Gioia Irwin, who has practiced for decades, told me that she has worked with many women who have experienced sexual trauma and others who experience energy blockages in the second *chakra* region. She teaches her students to bring intelligence through the core of the body, starting with the inner lines of the big toes and moving up the legs, through the pelvis, up the torso through the head. Aligning the body so as to work smoothly through these core lines helps *prana* to move through the body. She encourages her students to wake up the pelvis, balance the two sacro-iliac joints, and feel balanced in the second *chakra* region through *asana* (postures), *pranayama* (breath work) and *dhyana* (meditation).

For women who have experienced abuse or have blockages in the second *chakra* region she found 2 *asanas* to be particularly helpful: *viparita karini*--a variation of shoulder stand--which helps to open the pelvic and navel region by assisting the flow of energy; and supported *badakonasana* (butterfly) which releases the groin muscles and opens up the pelvic region. She reflected that women often found this work to be scary as it opened up parts of themselves that had been shut down for long periods of time in some cases. Women would be in tears in some of her classes as they were feeling their bodies in a way that they had not before. Yoga opened their bodies and after studying yoga many women felt their inner bodies were strengthened. Others found it too intense and then the teacher referred them to her therapeutic class where she would work more on a one-on-one level with them. As a yoga teacher her interest was in assisting women to understand their bodies so that they could move the energy through and be balanced. She emphasizes breath work (*pranayam*) with her students and has found this to be grounding and very helpful (Personal Communications with Gioia Irwin June 7, 2004). Furthermore, these breathing exercises have a profound positive impact on women who lost their sense of control as a result of having been assaulted (Franzblau, Smith, Echevarria, and Van Cantford, 2006).

Women who have been battered often suffer from depression, low self-efficacy, post-traumatic stress, anxiety, and low self-esteem. When a woman experiences abuse, the lack of support and loss of self-confidence can result in despair. Improving self-efficacy, the sense that we have control over our lives, is an important first step in

increasing battered women's sense of self-worth and confidence. This in turn will help enable them to make the changes in their lives that will free them from the abusive pattern (Franzblau, Smith, Echevarria, and Van Cantford, 2006).

In the words of an abuse survivor, Laureen Smith:

"I am a sexual abuse survivor. When I was 15 years old I was plied with obscene amounts of alcohol and forcibly raped by my brother's baseball coach. A year later, I was sexually molested by my church's minister. These were my first two sexual experiences ever. These two ordeals shaped much of my life from that time on. Through drug use, suicide attempts, crisis therapy, over-achieving, sexual dysfunction, spiritual isolation, body loathing and more, my life has been fraught with physical and psychic pain as I tried to "get through" day by day. And it was from these two experiences that I spent a good deal of my life's energy healing. In my early 30s I was introduced to yoga. And from that time on, slowly but surely, I have experienced profound healing from the detrimental effects of the abuse. My body, my spirit, my energy, and my life have been returned to me, in great part, because of yoga" (excerpt available online at <http://www.sunandmoonstudio.com/YogaArticle/YogaHealing.shtml>).

In summary, within yoga, *asana* (postures), *pranayama* (breathing exercises that increase life force), *bondas* (seals/locks) and *dhyana* (meditation) can be used to connect with each *chakra*. Yogic approaches to working through emotional, sexual, erotic issues are well complimented with music, movement, talk and other therapies and counseling as most yoga teachers are not trained in psychology or psychiatry.

Concluding Reflections

This paper has briefly dipped into the vast ocean of yoga and its balanced approach to women's sexuality. Swimming in the yogic ocean is one way of experiencing the deliciousness of womanhood. Practicing *asanas*, *bondas*, *pranayama*, *dhyana* and other aspects of yoga may be helpful for many women (and not necessarily for all) on their journey toward wholeness. Focusing on the interrelatedness of emotions and sexuality, located within the second *chakra*, using yogic practices, may be empowering. Yogic philosophy sees sexuality as part of the continuum of life, as a necessary part of experiencing the fullness of our existence. Journeying along the path of yoga is one which may be difficult and frustrating at times but it is always one in which we learn about ourselves. This self-awareness is a vital part of being a healthy, sexual being.

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