

# WRITING WEST TO EAST AND BACK AGAIN: A YOGIC APPROACH TO LIFE WRITING

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## Starting Out

Suffer for my art? One desperate day, I sat in front of a tangled manuscript trying to finish the last piece of my master's degree: the thesis. I'd been trying to write it for several years. Despairingly, I looked at the last paragraph I'd written and realized that I had written in a circle, arriving at a conclusion that looked a lot like a premise I'd proposed many pages earlier. As I stared at the computer screen, completely unable to think or act my way out of my dilemma, despair escalated to hysteria. I threw my body into a basket of dirty laundry, sobbed, and hit my head with my fists.

It was as much a breaking point as it was a point of departure. I'd given up so much – in time, money, and deep sacrifices to my personal life. I'd been accustomed to accomplishing everything I'd set out to do. I'd landed a graduate assistantship and achieved A's in most of my classes while holding down another part-time job as a legal secretary. To finish the thesis, I had done everything I'd been taught in composition pedagogy: I sat and wrote, just like the process-oriented approach prescribes. I even had a topic that engaged me, one that I enjoyed researching, but I just couldn't seem to express in writing what I understood in my reading and observed in the world-at-large. My thesis advisor had suggested I pick a topic simpler than the connection between spirituality and language. I'd tried, but I didn't care enough about the new topic to fully research it. Finally, when I tried again to complete the first manuscript and had a second, similar meltdown, in the interest of self-preservation, I gave up and dropped out.

But I didn't give up on writing. I had already begun publishing a bi-weekly column in the alternative press. There was something about the mentor relationship with my editor and my clear sense of purpose – he needed a specific number of words by a specific time on a specific topic, or the magazine would be in trouble. I wasn't in this writing thing alone.

anymore. Journalism engaged me differently than the rarified world of academia and the intimidating relationship I had with my advisor. What I was doing was practical, and I felt like I was part of something bigger, and I felt like I was on the inside, rather than outside trying to climb in as I had in grad school. At the same time, I continued writing poetry and eventually got some poetry published and even made a little money. I also began teaching developmental writing courses at the community college.

But I wasn't satisfied. I was driven by a desire to succeed and achieve, and many days I bulldozed my way through projects just trying to get them over and done. I didn't find much joy or happiness in my writing, though I *did* enjoy being published. In my mind, whatever wasn't published didn't count. If I weren't publishing enough, I personally felt diminished. If I believed what I had written wasn't very good, that meant I personally wasn't worth much.

There wasn't a lot of peace in this philosophy. I was consumed with brain chatter, and frankly, I thought my active mind was a sign of my intellect, so I was attached to relentless thought as much as I hated it. I felt very anxious most of the time. All the while, that unfinished degree haunted me. Finally, I decided to start over and pursue an MFA in creative nonfiction at Antioch University, where I was introduced to yoga as an approach to removing obstacles in my writing and where I began to develop a new relationship with writing.

The irony of my return to academia as an expert, especially before I had completed my graduate degree, was not lost on me. But I have brought to my composition classrooms a real understanding that writing is easier when it feels purposeful and supported. I understand the resistance my students face in their composition classes because I have had to navigate through my own resistance, and while process-oriented writing pedagogy did help in some ways, I have found that combining that approach with yoga philosophy and practices actually provides further relief of both existential and creative angst. I have begun sharing these ideas and practices with my students, leading guided meditation in my writing classroom to help students bring their awareness to the present moment, by calming their minds so they can focus on our class discussion. I also use meditation to help them deepen their awareness of past experiences so they can access richer material for their personal essays.

### Navigating through the West

Writing triggers commonly held, deeply-engrained, and often unchallenged beliefs that contribute to our suffering, both in general and in

the writing life: the idea that time is limited and running out; our belief that suffering deepens and ennobles us; and the conception that we are the sum of our thoughts and actions.

There's no denying it: the creative process is messy and inefficient. It's like hacking our way through a jungle using only our sense of direction and a machete blade, either of which may be sharp or dull depending on a host of factors including life circumstances, experience, and natural abilities – even the weather sometimes seems complicit in our failures or successes. There's no such thing as writer's napalm; you just have to start hacking and hope you don't end up a hack yourself in the process.

Much has been done to debunk writing as a mystical process, but most writers will tell you that a process-based approach alone is not enough to ensure success. This is as true for academic writing as it is for creative writing, though they each have different challenges. False starts, multiple drafts, and only one final product? It's certainly not the American way where we *Just Do It!* And where we are in either the fast lane or the drive-thru, embracing speed and convenience to get *there* quickly and save time.

The problem is *there* is not *here*; it exists in the future, not in the present. It takes time to get *there*. Because it takes time, there is no guarantee what will happen in the interim; *there* is only a speculation. In other words, *there* is more than just delayed gratification. To abandon the present for a speculative future is a high-stakes game, and the tendency once one has developed the "I'll be happy when..." mentality is to keep raising the stakes and stay in a state of dissatisfaction. With the busy schedules that many of us, students and instructors alike, face as we juggle the many demands in our lives, it is not easy to learn to slow down or to occupy the space of the present moment. In my classroom, I make sure that students understand that it's not just them! Planning for the future while living in the present? We all struggle. Whether we suffer in our efforts, however, is a choice.

The idea that we *should* suffer, however, is deeply embedded in our collective consciousness. Suffering has been advanced in Western culture as a noble, valuable experience. Aldous Huxley expressed the heart of this idea in 1923 through one of his fictional characters: "Perhaps it's good for one to suffer. Can an artist do anything if he's happy? Would he ever want to do anything? What is art, after all, but a protest against the horrible inclemency of life" (64). The notion is not only that suffering will motivate us but also that it will provide a wellspring of material with sufficient *gravitas* to make art. By extension, the upbeat and positive is suspicious or insignificant because it lacks *gravitas*. We relegate positivity to children's literature and entertainment writing. Happy is fluff.

Huxley's writing reflects a belief of Modernism, an early 20<sup>th</sup> century movement that glorified suffering and alienation as part of the creative process that continue to impact our views today.<sup>1</sup> An artist's identity and status was contingent upon him/her being an outsider, someone who was misunderstood and alienated from the general populace. Since artists were *avant garde* - ahead of the rest - they were misunderstood and therefore existentially alone. Furthermore, beginning in Modernism we see that the artist, as much as the art, is what is important. There was movement away from serving the viewer toward the artist serving his or her own self-expression. The result of this is further alienation as the result of one who shuts himself or herself off from purposeful connection with other people. Modernism also fosters the idea of the individual, the ego, as separate. A century later, these beliefs about suffering still inform our life view, especially those about creativity and writing.

But the problem can be traced back even further still: the Western obsession with the brain as the seat of consciousness and the end-all-to-be-all of our lives. Thank you, Rene Descartes! The 17<sup>th</sup> Century French philosopher's declaration "I think; therefore, I am" (*[Ego] Cogito Ergo Sum*), the cornerstone of Western philosophy, demonstrates the Western assumption that there is an individual ego-self, a self that is separate from the world.<sup>2</sup> The method at which Descartes reaches this assertion also reflects Western values: the primacy of the intellect and the marginalizing of the senses and emotions. To prove the world real, his methodology was to clear the table of all preconceived ideas and experience. The senses, he hypothesized, can't be trusted. However, the fact that he is thinking - in absence of any sensory input - is what clinches proof of his existence. It is this idea that pushes thinking to the forefront, giving it priority in what we believe is important.

Since then Descartes' proposition has gone through an associative evolution that looks like this:

- I think; therefore I am.
- Therefore, I am my brain.
- Therefore, the more I think, the more I am.

<sup>1</sup> The belief that "the emotional turbulence supposedly necessary for poetic genius to flourish" is examined by Algis Valiunas in "The Cursed Poets and Their Gods: The Tortured Lives and Spiritual Anguish of Three Great Modern Poets." *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life*. Feb 2012. Issue 220. 40+

<sup>2</sup> While we hear this statement most often in its Latin translation, Descartes wrote this statement first in French: "Je pense, donc je suis" in *Discourse on Method* (1637).

This seems especially true in academia, which develops thinkers in a competitive society of thinkers. Our minds don't value rest; they value activity. After all, the more we think, the more ideas we accumulate, the more we can publish, the more our chances of obtaining and keeping a full-time position increase, and the more we get paid. The problem with the idea of "I am my brain" is this: "Do you think the same thing now that you thought 10 years ago? Or five years ago? Or even a few days ago? Are we a different person merely because we change our minds?" Of course not.

None of these ideas – the crush of time, the glorification of suffering, or a sense of isolation – ever improved my life. They may have motivated me to write or otherwise work, but they had a hamster wheel effect. I was always running and never arriving. I was always anxious; this philosophy did not foster creativity or an intimate, sustaining connection with the world and people around me. My writing life reflected that anxiety and isolation. With humor, I share my experiences and observations about these problems with students because I think it strikes at the heart of some of the problems our society faces in writing, in academia, and in general. I foster connection by opening up to them, making myself vulnerable, and allowing them to identify with the similarities. The first essay in my freshman composition courses ask students to open up in a similar way about a personal experience that had an outcome that was the opposite of what they had expected or was implicitly ironic. We share these stories aloud before we write them down, developing connections between ideas and amongst writers.

### Exploring the East

I live yoga philosophies in the classroom rather than just preach them. These philosophic lessons come as the writing challenges arise: all we have is now; we are not our thoughts or actions, and we are not separate. The word *yoga* comes from the Sanskrit root, *yuj*, meaning to join or to yoke. In the ancient texts, *yoga* didn't mean the physical practice of the postures (*asanas*, which are used to prepare the body for meditation) as we think of it today; instead, *yoga* referred to awareness of and participation in the ultimate reality – that all things are united – rather than the habitual attachment to our apparent separation.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In early texts, like Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* (4<sup>th</sup> C. CE) and the *Upanishads*, the term "yoga" referred to raja yoga, which focused almost exclusively on the spiritual and meditative practices of yoga. Centuries later, *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (15<sup>th</sup> C. CE) placed emphasis first on training the body, then the mind. All yoga

You've probably experienced this yoga "union" before. I most often do in nature. When you are at the beach or in the forest and you are filled with serenity and reverence for what surrounds you, when merely being you is effortless, and you feel connected and sustained by the beauty (and somehow it's all beautiful, even the decay) that surrounds you: that is yoga. With practice, this sense of calm and connection can be maintained even in stressful or challenging circumstances – you know, like when you're writing!

Yoga philosophy and practices as a whole – there are eight branches altogether<sup>4</sup> – calm the mind, create equanimity, and clear the fog of delusion. In this state of union, we become aware we are not our minds (or any of the gymnastics they are capable of), and we are not separate (interestingly even the English word *individual* translates from its Latin origins to *not divided*). This idea of being a part of the greater whole was something I had experienced as a columnist. Unlike the competition I'd felt in grad school, at the magazine I felt supported and valued because my accomplishments contributed to the success of the publication and, by extension, my colleagues. In yoga, this idea of community is known as the *sangha*, and the relationship between the individual and the collective is mutually supportive. In my composition classroom, in addition to sharing our stories aloud and using small group assignments, I create writing *sangha* by honoring students' contributions, even the most botched or half-assed attempts. In fact, even silence or a missed assignment is a contribution that can be honored. Shaming, on the other hand is harmful, and non-harming (*ahimsa*) is the fundamental tenet of yoga philosophy.<sup>5</sup>

I'm certainly not condoning laziness in action or in thought. Thinking is certainly valuable. However, thinking is a fluctuation of the mind much like waves are fluctuations of the ocean. It's much easier to navigate when there is no turbulence. Furthermore, when waves repeatedly move in the same direction, sand eventually builds up on the shore; likewise, repeated patterns of thinking develop similar deposits, which manifest as habits of

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methods ultimately intend to lead to Divine union in meditation; the difference in these approaches is in the attention given to the physical body.

<sup>4</sup> The yoga system has eight component parts – the *yamas* (restraints), *niyamas* (observances), *asana* (postures), *pranayama* (breathing practices), *pratyahara* (control of the senses), *dharana* (focus), *dhyana* (meditation), all of which lead to *samadhi* (blissful union)

<sup>5</sup> Ahimsa (nonharming) is the first of five *yamas* (restraints) listed in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, and is a tenet of both Hindu and Buddhist spiritual practices.

mind.<sup>6</sup> These relentless waves of thought create and sustain the delusion of separation. Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, a seminal text of classical yoga (4<sup>th</sup> C. CE) explains, "yoga is the calming of the fluctuations of the mind."<sup>7</sup> Calming them in meditation allows the murky waters of the mind to clear. Then, consciousness becomes more expansive, more encompassing, and more aware of the connection between all things.

When I lead meditation in class, I begin by first asking students to bring attention to their physical body, including the breath, and then I lead them in systematically relaxing the body and slowing and deepening the breath. Eventually, we will begin focusing the mind on some aspect of the assignment at hand, but first we calm the breath; the breath is like the wind or water moving the turbine of the mind. There's scientific evidence to support this: rapid, shallow breathing signals the nervous system to be on alert and so the thoughts come faster.<sup>8</sup> As the thoughts come faster, often anxiety results. No one performs well when he or she is anxious. Calm the breath, calm the mind. Slow, deep breathing creates more oxygen in the bloodstream and enhances clarity of thought and overall performance. But it also lets us be relaxed enough to take in details of the present moment fully, which is the goal of this mindfulness meditation.<sup>9</sup>

Coming into stillness is impossible. Nothing is ever still. That is also a delusion. The universe is expanding. Electrons are orbiting in their shells. As long as you are living, even in apparent stillness, your cells are dividing. Upon your death, even in apparent stillness, your body begins to decay. Yogic philosophy helps us detach from anxiety about getting into *action*, such as writing, because it is the nature of the universe to be *in action*. Yoga philosophy attributes this constant action to the three *gunas* from which all matter is made: *tamas*, *rajas*, and *sattva*.<sup>10</sup> *Tamas* is inertia, sloth, solidity, darkness, and ignorance. *Rajas* is restlessness, activity, passion, desire, attachment. *Sattva* is satisfaction, contentment.

<sup>6</sup> Psychology would call this habitual thinking "conditioning" whereas in yoga philosophy these habits of mind are called *samskaras*.

<sup>7</sup> Sutra 1.2.

<sup>8</sup> Refer to Jerath, R, JW Edry, VA Barnes, and V Jerath. "Physiology of Long Pranayamic Breathing: Neural Respiratory Elements May Provide a Mechanism That Explains How Slow Deep Breathing Shifts the Autonomic Nervous System." *Medical Hypotheses*. 67.3 (2006): 566-71.

<sup>9</sup> For another perspective on meditation in the composition classroom, see Garretson, Kate. "Being Allowing And Yet Directive: Mindfulness Meditation In The Teaching Of Developmental Reading And Writing." *New Directions For Community Colleges* 2010.151 (2010): 51-64.

<sup>10</sup> The *Samkhya Karika* (200-450 CE) and the *Bhagavad Gita* (100 BCE-200 CE) both discuss the *gunas* and their relationship to the phenomenal world.

equanimity, illumination, joy, connection, and egolessness. These three qualities are in all things and make up all things. They cannot be separated. However, one (or two) can dominate. They can also be balanced. For instance, the yoga postures (*asana*) reduce *rajas*, and breath work (*pranayama*) reduces *tamas*, and the combination allows for an increase in *sattva*, which is the ideal state for meditation.

*Tamas* thwarts accomplishment when it comes in the forms of procrastination, laziness, and ignorance; it seems like a writer's worst enemy. Not knowing where to even get started is certainly something we've all faced, and process-oriented pedagogy seeks to use Newtonian law (a body in motion tends to stay in motion; a body at rest tends to stay at rest) to get the rollerball pen rolling by giving it a gentle nudge in any direction. The idea is to move out of the *tamasic* state by applying a little old-fashioned discipline. In yoga, discipline is a highly valued attribute. However, if you don't bring the mind into union/harmony first, any time you try to practice self-discipline, you create a split in the mind, a sort of schizophrenia where the two selves (the one who wants to get to work and the one who resists) are at war.<sup>11</sup> You're actually creating more turbulence than peace.

*Rajas* is the quality most goal-oriented people thrive on. *Rajastic* minds are quick, often restless. They are attached to excellence and they often have too many projects going at once. The problem with too much *rajas*, however, is the mental hamster wheel. *Rajas* creates more *rajas*. People dominated by *rajas* are seldom satisfied for long. After one accomplishment, they are ready to move on to the next. Sure, it may motivate us to work, to publish, and to be recognized, but it's an endless pursuit to the next bigger and better achievement. In addition to chronic dissatisfaction, *rajas* creates *tamas*, which ultimately manifests as a depression, crash, or creative block. My meltdown and hysteria because of my inability to manifest my goals shows just how haywire the *rajas* quality becomes if it goes unchecked.

*Sattva* is what we should strive for, but the striving should be done with *tapas* (discipline), not with *rajas*, in a surrendered state (accepting our limitations) in service of the greater good. A writer who is *sattvic* works with non-attachment but with discipline, for the work's sake only, understanding that it is her nature to be in action and that the work is done through her but by the *gunas*. There is a sense of surrender, selflessness and service in this state.

<sup>11</sup> Swami Muktibodhananda explains in the introduction to *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, a medieval text (6<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> C CE) how to avoid such "animosity towards yourself": you must first discipline the body; then, discipline the mind. p. 6.



Because the *gunas* exist in all things, the writing process is no exception. It's helpful to look at the *gunas* as a flowering plant to appreciate how they all function. *Tamas*, though we may see it as negative, is useful. Think of this as the part of the plant that is in the ground. A root system springs from a mere seed—stability and fertility can arise out of the dense, dark earth. Sometimes writers are stuck in *tamas*, but if we are pulled up by the roots out of our darkness, we aren't going to thrive. Instead, we have to create the right conditions to push up toward the light. In the flower analogy, *rajas* is the stem – or as Dylan Thomas put it, “the green fuse that drives the flower”<sup>12</sup> – it is the writing process itself, full of energy and creativity. In *satva*, we blossom, and in the illumined final draft, we see the truth more clearly than we could before.

While the *gunas* manifest in all things, including us and our actions, we are responsible for our actions. According to the yogic concept of *karma*, however, while we are responsible for our actions, we are *not* defined by them.<sup>13</sup> Our work is our karma, and doing our work is a virtue. We have the right to work, but we do not have the right to the fruits of our work. Just because my students work hard, they aren't entitled to an “A” or even a passing grade. Likewise, I have a right to write, but I do not have a right to publish, be famous, or make a living from my work. I apply this in the classroom by emphasizing to my students that they are responsible for their essays and their grades, but they aren't their essays or their grades. I treat them with reverence, regardless of their achievements because I honor the lessons they offer in compassion and connection.

Here's an analogy I like to use: the universe is a giant Play-Doh Fun Factory with its gears and cranks squeezing out multi-colored gunk into different forms. The *gunas* are the Play-Doh, and each of us is a unique nozzle that allows stuff to come into the world uniquely ours. Some days the nozzle is clogged. Or broken. Stuff sometimes comes out messed up. It happens. When it does, I get to work fixing it by creating favorable conditions for creativity. Or, sometimes, I simply accept the condition of my nozzle and work with what's coming out. It's not my job to like it, only to churn it out.

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<sup>12</sup> Using Dylan Thomas's poem “The Force That Through The Green Fuse Drives The Flower” to further explain Hindu philosophy, the “force” is Om or Brahman, the source of all things, which also exists in all things and in which all things exist.

<sup>13</sup> Chapter 3 of the *Bhagavad Gita* is devoted to an explanation of karma yoga and the virtue of work.

## The Journey Home

The *Bhagavad Gita* tells the tale of the mighty warrior Arjuna, who is consumed with self-doubt on the eve of a great battle. His friend and charioteer, the god Krishna tells Arjuna that Arjuna's work is his karma, and that it is better to do his own work poorly than to do someone else's work well. Since Arjuna's karma has made him a warrior, he must pick up the sword and fight.

My pen is analogous to Arjuna's sword. Since my karma has made me a writer, I must pick up my pen and write. I don't have to worry about how gifted I am at what I do – all I have to do is my best – because it's better to do my work poorly, than some other work well. In my seven years of devoted study, yoga hasn't solved all the ills of the writing life. As I approach my goals, I still sometimes get blocked and wrestle with anxieties, but I don't harm myself anymore. I've learned to be gentle, to take breaks, to literally and figuratively stretch in new directions, and I've learned to live with unresolved questions. I am still challenged by intimidating and high-stakes environments, but I've adopted a philosophy and a practice that helps me maintain equanimity. I try to approach my work with a surrendered discipline rather than anxious aggression. When I am in a *sattvic* state, I acknowledge that everything I do is flowing through me; it's creativity through me, not of me. My writing, it turns out, isn't actually about me.

One day, as I was telling a class of freshman composition students the story of my grad school failure, I realized that, though I'd quit that master's program, I had never actually abandoned my thesis. I'd been exploring the connection between spirituality and language for many years. Along the way, I discovered that writing is challenging because it is not one thing but many. Writing itself is yoga—*union*. Writing is the starting point, writing is the jungle, writing is the machete, writing is the map, writing is the compass, and writing is the destination: right here, right now.

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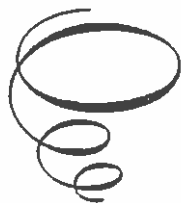
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