

Why Cats Don't Do Yoga

This article is dedicated, as always, to my teacher Godfrey Devereux, without whom, no doubt, there would be a cat in every yoga shala.

The famous double slit experiment, at the heart of quantum physics, demonstrates beyond reasonable doubt something fundamental about the universe. Put very briefly, a single photon, a particle of light, fired at a screen with two slits in it, passes through both of them. When a detector is placed on one of the slits, the photon passes through just one slit. The conclusion, a particle can be anywhere, at any time, until it is measured. Then you know the thing you measured, though everything else about it remains uncertain.

The great physicist Richard Feynman once speculated there might only be a single particle, weaving the whole fabric of the universe on the loom of space and time. However that may be, Feynman also famously remarked that anyone who is not amazed by quantum physics hasn't understood it. The double slit experiment, he said, 'contains the only mystery.'

Indeed the world is amazing and mysterious, a flower, a new born baby's eyes, a lover's kiss, but the peculiar perplexity aroused by quantum mechanics comes because we are locked into history/herstory. Stories are fundamental to being human.

If we surround the beast and all throw together then we will eat it, not it eat us. If you dig under that tree when the fourth moon is full and cook the root until it smells so, then it is good to eat. If you go down to the corner shop before 10 o'clock you can buy a frozen pizza and some tinnies.

So poor naked, defenseless humanity relies for its very existence upon the agreed story. Upon so many stories, overlapping, interwoven, creating an apparent fabric in which to survive and buy insurance against any unwonted unraveling of the tale. Of course, the hand writes on and as it does, traveling across the page, so events unfold, things happen, one after another and, without even thinking, we see the arrow of time moving past, from left to right. Time passes. Time passed, and then.....

Well no, it didn't! The last thing time does is pass. There is no thing for it to pass by. Language betrays the story. If time passed you by, you would have to exist outside it. Beyond the odd, stoned hippy, lost on the beaches of Goa or Ibiza, this is unlikely. The arrow of time comes straight towards you. What is more, being two-dimensional, when, as it were, turned around towards you, it reduces to a point, sunyata, the

void, containing everything and nothing. NOW! Is all there is, everything arising in the moment, including time itself.

But, you protest, I exist. I remember when.... etc, etc. More stories. We construct also the stories of our apparent lives, hoping and fearing for our supposed futures. We imagine ourselves to be these characters in the story. It is all, though, just a story, constructed by the amazing human cortex, a symbolic model of something in which to wrap our fragile egos, a model fundamentally undone by looking deeply into the nature of the universe via the double slit experiment. Where it is revealed that everything is possible now, and resolved now.

The efforts of the human cortex to resolve its difficulties on its own terms are, strikingly, both elaborate and unsuccessful. They appear to include the whole of String Theory, for example. Countless mathematicians and theoretical physicists no doubt, sit with furrowed brows, clenched jaws and knitted legs, desperately seeking the golden solution, when all they need to do is to relax and breathe.

Quite when people started doing yoga is really not known. One can imagine the practice began when conflicts between people started to become serious, the world less magical, beginning to fill up with other humans, opposed and forced migrations, nomads attacking settlers, the very old stories. Certainly the oldest spiritual scripts seem to have arisen out of a need to find peace and meaning in a world of chaotic conflict.

Whatever, people need yoga because they think. "Yoga citta vritti nirodha" says Patanjali. Yoga is to let go the chatter of the mind. Of course, the mind will chatter and any attempt to stop it is unnatural, a bullet, perhaps, a very hard blow, a whole bottle of whiskey. We need the mind and its abilities to survive. It's insistence on priority, however, denies us peace and true happiness.

The perspective of time changed, and the stories of our lives taken a little more lightly, we can see ourselves as, not a few decades old, but as a pattern arising back through, as it were, the arrow of time. A pattern as old as the universe, constructed out of particles created in the Big Bang, through millions of evolutionary forms, into now. Looked at in this dimension the human cortex is a very flashy, new thing. We are so easily bewitched by its abilities. That there is another view, much older, much deeper, is simply confirmed by quantum experiment.

Yoga teaches us to move and breath as one. It provides, surprisingly rapidly if taught effectively, a direct experience of suspending the measuring instruments of the senses, pratyahara, the fifth limb of asta anga, or eight limbed, yoga. It does this through teaching internal

focus, initially softening and broadening parts of the body while inhaling and lengthening while exhaling. As sensitivity and focus improve this process becomes more subtle so that all of the body softens, broadens and lengthens together, so that breath, body and awareness come together. Samapatti is the exquisite Sanskrit word, meaning, perhaps, to coincide. As measurement by the senses is suspended, so the infinite possibility inherent in now becomes clearer and life resolves in endless playfulness with each exhalation.

What's going to happen next? Wow, just look at that!

And, why is it cats don't do yoga? Well you could argue they don't need to think symbolically, instead reacting instinctively to the moment. The truth is, what we perceive as a cat is also just part of the story. In reality, they're all locked up in Shrodinger's Box, not knowing if they're alive or dead.

mac@elementalyoga.co.uk – March 2007